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DeSantis Admits to Faulty 2024 Election Strategy: 'I Should Have Gone on Everything'

While the Florida governor often scrutinizes mainstream media, he has since admitted that not utilizing the same publications was the wrong campaign move ahead of the highly-anticipated US election.

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis admitted to radio host Hugh Hewitt on Thursday that his presidential campaign's media strategy was riddled with missteps.

Rather than focusing on conservative media outlets, the Republican contender confessed that he should have had a more blanketed approach to his media outreach.

"I should have just been blanketing. I should have gone on all [sic] the corporate shows. I should have gone on everything. I started doing that as we got into the end of the summer, and we did it. But we had an opportunity, I think, to come out of the gate and do that and reach a much broader folk. Now, I'm everywhere. I'll show up whenever," DeSantis said.

At the beginning of 2023, DeSantis seemed fairly matched with Trump in the GOP 2024 primary polls: in early January of last year Trump held 45% while DeSantis held about 35%. On Thursday, Trump's poll numbers soared to 65%, while former UN ambassador and governor Nikki Haley stood at 12% and DeSantis took 11%.

Despite what was forecasted to be a strong lead, DeSantis has struggled to cut into Trump's popularity. On Monday, he finished second in the Iowa caucuses while Trump came in first by a wide margin. Haley finished third.

"I committed to do the debate tonight on WMUR and ABC in New Hampshire," said DeSantis of the recently canceled debate. "I'm the only one that's willing to debate. I've done these televised town halls. I go out and take questions from voters. You know, I think that's good. I'm the only one that's not at this point running a basement campaign. Biden's running a basement campaign. Trump won't debate, won't take questions from voters. And now, Haley won't debate and won't take questions from voters."

In July, DeSantis' campaign tried to shift their media strategy in order to incorporate more mainstream networks and town halls. He was also the only candidate to accept an invitation to participate in the ABC News/WMUR debate that was scheduled for Thursday in New Hampshire.

Thursday's debate was canceled after Haley voiced her frustration with Trump's continued absences from the debate. Trump said last month that he would debate one of his opponents if the New Hampshire primary results are "very close."

A town hall with Haley is expected on Thursday in lieu of the debate.

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Webb Telescope Uncovers Oldest, Most Distant Black Hole Ever Observed

The black hole dates back to the dawn of the universe, and astronomers say it is “eating” its host galaxy to death.

An international team led by the University of Cambridge has used the James Webb Space Telescope (JWST) to observe the oldest known black hole.

Researchers with the investigating team say the black hole dates back to more than 13 billion years ago, some 400 million years after the big bang.

Typically, black holes are formed when massive stars die in a supernova explosion and their cores collapse under gravitational force. The result is a gravitational pull that is so intense, not even light can escape. Some black holes are also formed from stellar collisions, and some early universe black holes called “direct-collapse black holes” are created simply by early galaxies influencing each other.

Astronomers believe this black hole could not have formed from the death of a star, as the black hole is 1.6 million times the mass of our sun, and was in place 400 million years after the creation of the universe. Scientists have surmised the celestial body could not have grown so large in a relatively short timespan, space-wise.

"It is essentially not possible to grow such a massive black hole so fast so early in the universe," said Robert Maiolino, an astrophysicist at the University of Cambridge. "Essentially, there is not enough time according to classical theories. So one has to invoke alternative scenarios."

Astronomers theorize the black hole could have been born at its current size, or it ate up matter at a rate about five times higher than what was thought to be possible - and eating up matter is precisely what this galaxy is doing.

"This black hole is essentially eating the [equivalent of] an entire sun every five years," Maiolino noted. "It's actually much higher than we thought could be feasible for these black holes."

The black hole feeds on its host galaxy GN-z11, which was first spotted in 2016 and was the most distant galaxy identified at that point. The black hole is believed to be radiating energy at such a high rate that it could sweep away the gas within its host galaxy.

Maiolino adds that he and his team hope future JWST observations of black holes will help them determine the different manners in which black holes form.

The study was published Wednesday in the journal Nature.

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‘Guilty of Genocide’: US Brushes Off South Africa’s Accusation Due to Fear of Culpability

The death toll of Israel’s “gory genocide” of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip has now reached a death toll of about 30,000 people, according to the reliefweb blog which is a service provided by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

Last week, South Africa formally accused Israel of committing genocide against Palestinians and asked that the United Nations’ top court order Israel to immediately cease their military

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operations. Israel brushed off the accusation and said it was acting to defend itself against Hamas and not the Palestinian population. They have also accused South Africa of acting as an agent for the terrorist group Hamas, which South Africa has rejected.

The US has continued "ironclad" support for Israel, according to the US State Department's own words. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and other US officials have called the charges against South Africa "meritless" as acknowledging "Israel's genocide" would not only "expose US culpability" it would also cause the US to acknowledge their own mistakes, writes Margaret Kimberley, an author and senior columnist, in a recent article published to the Black Agenda Report.

Kimberley spoke to Sputnik's Political Misfits on Thursday, suggesting that the definition of "genocide" sets a low bar.

"Thanks to South Africa's case against Israel in the International Criminal Court, we know that the definition of genocide sets a rather low bar," said Kimberley at Black Agenda report.

"[Genocide] means 'any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group'. And it goes on to describe 'bodily or mental harm', and 'inflicting conditions calculated to bring about its physical destruction [in whole or in part]'."

In her article, Kimberley's definition of genocide also includes: 'imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group', and, 'forcibly transferring children of the group to another group'.

"It first of all proves that what Israel is doing in Gaza—thanks to their own intemperate language and frankly, bragging about their ethnic cleansing campaign—that they are guilty of genocide. But it means most of the wars that happen in the world are genocidal. Vietnam, then, was a genocidal war. Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Somalia," she continued. "South Africa has done quite a service, not only in charging Israel with the crime of genocide."

Sputnik's Garland Nixon pointed out that the US has had the "ability, the authority, the economic and military power" to halt Israel's actions and has refused to do so. Not only that, the US is also the biggest supplier of military aid to Israel, according to a report from November.

"Israel could not do any of this without the US. So it's only proper that the US also be charged," said Kimberley. "I hope this is the beginning of a new way for people to think about these crimes and to acknowledge these military actions as crimes, crimes against humanity, war crimes, genocide, all of these definitions."

"South Africa's case, frankly, is based on the public pronouncements of Israeli officials, they've been bragging about it that they're committing ethnic cleansing. So it is a disgrace. The case would be described as meritless, but what can we expect from the country without whom these crimes would not be taking place?"

According to a report from earlier this month, the Israeli Heritage Minister Amichai Eliyahu urged that Israel should find "ways for Gazans that are more painful than death" in order to win the conflict in Gaza. The minister went on to say that Israel should break the morale of Palestinians by destroying their homes, breaking their national dream, and should be driven out of their land via "voluntary immigration".

In November, the minister even called for a nuclear bomb to be dropped on Gaza. He was suspended as a result and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said his statements were "not based in reality".

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Sputnik's Wilmer Leon then addressed a recent American news article that claimed the US secretary of state is "overrated". Blinken, Leon suggests, actually possesses an "undisguised design for the actual practice of diplomacy".

"'He's overrated'. That's being very kind," answered Kimberley. "Blinken, like his boss and his coworkers, are thoroughly incompetent. They are people whose minds are best in the Cold War-era. They do not understand the most basic things about, or understand the fact that the US should be trying to get along with other countries instead of thinking they can contain Russia or contain China."

"[Blinken] is one of these people who's in the revolving door when there's a Democrat in office. He'll be back. As bad as they are, they can fail by their own standards, and they just go around and around in a circle," explained Kimberley. "They have the right connections. They went to the right schools, they have the right friends, but they know absolutely nothing about diplomacy. And so it's clear that this system is not about diplomacy. They want to keep promoting this idea that the US can run the whole world, telling everybody what to do. And so we get these horrible people over and over again."

"Blinken has been an absolute disaster. He and his boss and all of his colleagues and everything happening in Gaza now is not surprising when you consider how they see the world: their amateurish nature and the messes they have made all over the world. By their standards, they have failed," said Kimberley.

"This is bipartisan policy, all of these disasters around the world. What did they succeed at blowing up Nord Stream? Well, they're forcing the Germans to buy US-fracked gas. So I suppose they've won there, but they haven't won anywhere else. Now they're stuck in Ukraine. They can't get out of it because of their own stupidity. And Ukrainians are still dying because of them," she added.

"By their own standards, they have failed every time."

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The DOJ Magic Trick

Last week, South Africa formally accused Israel of committing genocide against Palestinians and asked that the United Nations' top court order Israel to immediately cease their military operations. Israel brushed off the accusation and said it was acting to defend itself against Hamas and not the Palestinian population.

"Israel could not do any of this without the US. So it's only proper that the US also be charged," said Margaret Kimberley. "I hope this is the beginning of a new way for people to think about these crimes and to acknowledge these military actions as crimes."

The US has continued to support Israel which the US State Department says is "ironclad". Secretary of State Antony Blinken and other US officials have called the charges against South

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Africa “meritless” as acknowledging “Israel’s genocide” would not only “expose US culpability” it would also cause the US to acknowledge their own mistakes, writes Kimberley.

This was the telegram I sent but I didn’t receive a link^

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Carlson, Haley or Stefanik: Who Will Trump Pick as VP on 2024 Ticket?

The selection of a vice presidential candidate is said by followers of US politics to create an opportunity to “balance the ticket,” but some running mates bring risks as well as rewards. Observers say Donald Trump is on a glide path to the Republican nomination after his thumping victory in the Iowa caucuses, with pollsshowing the former US president in the lead even in the home states of his rivals. Trump’s lasting popularity comes even in the face of an unprecedented 91 felony charges which could dramatically upend this year’s race for the White House.

Given Trump’s commanding victory Monday, speculation is emerging over who the billionaire would choose as his vice presidential pick for November’s election. His selection of former Indiana Governor Mike Pence was said to play a role in securing the backing of social conservatives in 2016, although Trump himself was allegedly ambivalent about the decision. The two famously had a major falling out, with Trump viewing Pence as disloyal in the wake of Trump’s questioning of the outcome of the 2020 election.

In trademark dramatic fashion, Trump teased he already had a vice presidential candidate in mind at a recent town hall although an adviser later clarified “nothing is finalized.” Here, Sputnik takes a look at some of the top contenders for the job as well as what their selection may entail for US foreign policy and the country’s backing of Ukraine in the protracted Donbass conflict. Some picks would rally distinct factions of the GOP’s base while one in particular would provoke major controversy.

Tucker Carlson

Given former Fox News host Tucker Carlson has no experience in electoral politics, the firebrand media personality may at first seem like an odd choice for vice president of the United States. Conventional analysis has speculated Trump may prefer a candidate with experience in Congress to help navigate the passage of legislation in the House and Senate. Still, Carlson is undeniably popular with many Republicans and has an international profile.

Carlson was a faithful supporter of Trump throughout his tenure as nightly host on Fox News, fulfilling Trump’s key criteria that any running mate should be unquestionably loyal. Trump was said to have frequently watched Carlson’s program during his time in the White House. As other GOP candidates took to the debate stage in August, Trump instead recorded an interview with the popular commentator, showing the two still share a close relationship.

The selection of Carlson would demonstrate Trump’s commitment to shaking up Washington’s mainstream foreign policy establishment as the media personality has consistently questioned US support for the Zelensky regime in Ukraine. Carlson even invited traditionally left-wing

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figures on his program to critique American foreign policy, such as when he spoke to investigative journalist Aaron Maté about the role of the United States in the Nord Stream pipeline sabotage. The host's anti-establishment foreign policy views helped make him the bête noire of liberal media outlets like The New York Times.

Carlson remains a dark horse candidate for vice president, as acknowledged recently by Donald Trump Jr. and the National Republican Senatorial Committee. Trump spoke favorably of the idea recently, saying Carlson has "great common sense."

But it remains to be seen whether the former president would make such a provocative choice given he already faces documented opposition from America's powerful foreign policy deep state.

Vivek Ramaswamy

Like Carlson, American tech entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy would also be an unorthodox choice for VP. The upstart presidential candidate also has no formal political experience and was virtually unknown in the United States just one year ago. Still, Ramaswamy has made a splash in Republican Party politics with his blunt rhetoric and criticism of mainstream media.

Ramaswamy would also be similar to Carlson in the sense of his unconventional foreign policy views. The former biotech executive has questioned US military aid from the standpoint of the MAGA movement's "America First" philosophy, suggesting the country's massive defense spending is often unaligned with the interests of average Americans.

He claimed to be the first among this year's GOP presidential candidates to call for an end to lethal aid to Ukraine, an increasingly popular position among many Republicans and some Democrats.

Ramaswamy was mentioned as a popular VP choice recently by conservative activist Charlie Kirk, and speculation intensified when he shared a stage with Trump shortly after dropping out of the presidential primary contest this week.

"He's a fantastic guy. He's got something that's very special," said Trump after receiving the entrepreneur's support Tuesday. "It's an honor to have his endorsement."

Still, others say Ramaswamy's views and style are too similar to Trump's to make him a suitable vice presidential pick. But a Trump-Ramaswamy ticket would be another powerful sign of widespread opposition to US foreign policy orthodoxy.

Nikki Haley

Former South Carolina Governor and UN ambassador Nikki Haley may have had the most meteoric rise out of all of this year's contenders for the GOP presidential nomination.

Although she's been out of electoral politics since 2018, Haley has performed strongly in polls and debates and has cemented her position as the pick of many powerful voices in the Republican Party establishment. Given her performance, she would seem to be a natural choice for Trump's vice president, and indeed much speculation has emerged about a Trump-Haley ticket.

But the candidate has engendered intense opposition from many Trump supporters. Radio talk show host Charlie Kirk again sounded off on her suitability as VP this week in a strongly-worded warning on the X social media platform (formerly Twitter).

"Nikki Haley must not become Trump's VP candidate," wrote Kirk. "Pro war, pro illegals, pro censorship, pro DC Uniparty. Haley would single handedly drag down Trump enthusiasm 10-15%. The base would revolt."

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The post was endorsed by maverick Florida representative and Trump supporter Matt Gaetz of Florida.

Haley is seen by Kirk and others as a throwback to the Bush-Cheney years of the GOP when the party pursued an intensely neoconservative foreign policy vision. The Bush years resulted in two unpopular wars being launched in Iraq and Afghanistan which some estimates suggest resulted in the deaths of some 4.5 million people.

Polling has shown Republican supporters and the American public at large have demonstrated more skepticism towards a confrontational US foreign policy in the years since.

Haley is likely the strongest supporter of US aid to Ukraine in this year's Republican presidential nomination contest, even as other candidates like Ron DeSantis have demonstrated ambivalence toward the policy. Haley's stance has won her admiration from foreign policy elites but opposition from others.

Trump himself also seems to harbor resent for the former diplomat, turning to his Truth Social platform recently to attack Haley. Trump posted an edited photo of his Republican Party opponent, placing Haley's face on the body of 2016 Democratic Party candidate Hillary Clinton, cementing the impression the two are similar in their hawkish foreign policy views.

Elise Stefanik

Upstate New York Rep. Elise Stefanik maintains a lower profile than other candidates on Trump's VP shortlist, but the GOP lawmaker has done much to endear herself to the former president over the last several years.

Stefanik became a strong Trump supporter after his surprise victory in the 2016 election, ultimately becoming one of his most loyal backers in Washington. The New York congresswoman worked on Trump's defense team during his impeachment in 2019 and continued to back the former president amidst his challenge of the 2020 election results.

"If you're Trump, you want someone who's loyal above all else," said one Republican Party official of Stefanik. "Particularly because he sees Mike Pence as having made a fatal sin."

Stefanik's profile grew recently as she made headlines with her tough questioning of university leaders during campus antisemitism hearings in Congress. The saga convinced Trump advisers of the 39-year-old lawmaker's toughness and messaging abilities.

"She picks her shots and she knows where her leverage is," said former Trump strategist Steve Bannon. "And she understands something that's quite rare today, which is modern communications. She knows what can make an impact. So she's clearly a huge talent."

"What MAGA's got to do is make sure that President Trump fully considers the alternatives, because he's going to be under tremendous pressure from the donors to pick Nikki Haley, and from Fox," he added. "They're profiling her right now. It's the Nikki Haley channel."

Observers say Stefanik may effectively thread the needle of representing a VP pick with some mass appeal who still doesn't upstage Trump. Analysts speculate she would help the former president broaden his appeal in the general election without offending his strongest supporters.

"Haley's name was thrown around a lot because they were looking for someone to come onto the ticket that can win over a certain demographic of the electorate that Trump has struggled with," explained New York Young Republican Club President Gavin Wax. "But I think anything that Nikki Haley would have brought to the table, Elise brings to the table – without costing any votes from the base, or from MAGA, or from more conservative voters."

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Iranian Strike Draws Attention to Border with Pakistan, Israeli and US Role in Region

Tensions have flared between Iran and Pakistan in recent days, but one international affairs expert is pointing to the destabilizing role of Western powers in the Middle East.

Iran drew headlines Tuesday when it launched a missile and drone attack on two alleged terrorist bases in Pakistan's southwestern Balochistan province. It was the first time Iran attacked targets on Pakistani soil, which Iran's foreign minister claimed was necessary to weaken the dangerous Jaish ul-Adl (lit. "Army of Justice") terrorist group.

Pakistan responded angrily to the development, withdrawing its ambassador in Tehran in protest of the claimed "blatant breach of Pakistan's sovereignty."

Sputnik's Fault Lines program spoke with Professor Mohammad Marandiof the University of Tehran to place the events in context and determine whether they represent a harbinger of antagonistic relations with Islamabad. Hosts Jamarl Thomas and Melik Abdul also examined the role of Israel in regional affairs amidst its assault on Gaza and examined whether China could play a part in mediating between Pakistan and Iran.

'An Imminent Threat'

Marandi drew attention to Jaish al-Adl, an armed group of Sunni Islamist separatists that operates along and across Iran's border with Pakistan in the southeastern region of the country. Jaish al-Adl claims to represent the interests of the minority Balochi ethnic group and opposes the Iranian government. They have taken credit for a number of attacks against Iranian political and military officials.

"They carried out a series of attacks in Iran including, a few weeks ago, an attack which killed 11 border guards," Marandi noted. "They were about to strike Iran again. They gathered in two bases and they were about to move towards the border."

"The Iranians saw that this was an imminent threat, and they had a small window of opportunity," claimed the professor of English literature and Orientalism. "They calculated that if they wait, it'll be another tragedy. they felt they had to strike, even though they knew that the Pakistani government would be very unhappy, understandably."

Marandi claimed that Tehran didn't make the decision lightly but was forced to act amidst a difficult situation on the Pakistani border where people on both sides often cross freely. He claimed the problem is compounded by poverty in Pakistan with many people crossing into Iran as "economic refugees."

"Because of the economic situation in Pakistan, first of all, Pakistan's army is mostly focused on India," the expert said. "So they don't have many resources on this side of the country… it's very difficult when the Pakistanis are not controlling their side of the border."

He claimed the incident, while regrettable, wasn't a sign of hostility towards Pakistan's government, saying, "the relationship between Iran and Pakistan is quite good. This is an incident that will not undermine the relationship." Marandi also noted upcoming elections in Iran, stressing that the Ebrahim Raisi administration had a political incentive to avoid appearing weak.

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The professor noted Tehran had also carried out attacks on alleged terrorists recently in Syria and Iraq, claiming a common thread of Israeli and Western support for various anti-Iran groups.

The Hand of Israel

Israel has drawn outrage throughout the Middle East for its military campaign in the besieged Gaza Strip, which has killed almost 25,000 Palestinians. Tel Aviv's posture has drawn condemnation from Turkey, Egypt, and even Saudi Arabia which was reportedly set to seek normalization with Israel before the latest outbreak of hostilities. Recently fear has spread that Gazans could suffer mass starvation as Israel enforces a tight blockade on the territory.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's military difficulties in Gaza as well as his perilous political position have generated speculation he may seek a broader regional war.

"The Israelis, since they've been losing the ground war in Gaza and things have been going very poorly for them among the… international community, they've been globalizing their resources against Iran to put pressure on Iran," said Marandi. "We've seen a series of air attacks, both in Kerman, as I mentioned, but also others."

"All these different groups are right now being mobilized by the Israelis," Marandi alleged. "We have to remember that the Israelis have a long lasting relationship with ISIS* because ISIS during the Syrian Dirty War had bases alongside the Golan Heights."

Israel shared an open opposition to the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria with Islamist militants in the country, many of whom have ties to ISIS and Wahabbist ideology. Speculation emerged that Israel was backing the Syrian rebels, with the Israel Defense Forces chief finally admitting in 2019 that the country had supplied them with weapons.

Support for Islamist radicals in the region has long been a tactic of the United States as well, with the country's backing of the Mujahideen against Soviet forces in Afghanistan providing perhaps the most famous example. The flourishing of religious extremism in the country would empower terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda**, who organized the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States.

Marandi made similar accusations regarding Jaish al-Adl, claiming they are "affiliated to Western intelligence agencies."

The professor denounced the US' role in the region, and in particular their strong support for Israel which has seen the Biden administration consistently obstruct efforts to hold Israel to account at the United Nations.

"Mr. Biden should not tie their destiny to the fate of Netanyahu," said the expert. "The full scale cooperation of Biden in the White House with folks like Netanyahu in Israel is the root of insecurity in the region. President Biden should immediately abandon his full support for this genocide of the Palestinians and the killing of more than 13,500 Palestinian children."

"Stop the war in Gaza and allow peace to be restored in our region."

A Role for China?

China has increasingly made an effort to mediate between countries in the Middle East, most recently in its brokering of a deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The United States is increasingly seen as a dishonest broker by many in the region, while China is viewed as a more neutral party. The decline in America's perception has seen Middle Eastern countries strengthen ties with China, as well as Russia.

Host Melik Abdul asked about the possibility for China to play a helpful role in Iran-Pakistan relations, noting their recent statement urging both countries to exercise restraint.

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“China can play a constructive role,” said Marandi. “If, for example, China can help Pakistan build up infrastructure and border security, that would go a long way in stopping these sort of attacks.”
“Pakistan, as we speak, doesn't have those resources,” the expert added. “[On the] Iranian side, they're going to reinforce the border further after this, and Pakistan doesn't have those resources. So if China did come in and assist Pakistan in creating border security infrastructure that would be very helpful.”
China recently released a joint statement with the Arab League calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. Both parties denounced recent US and UK-backed attacks in Yemen and insisted a resolution of the Palestine-Israel conflict was the only way to ensure peace in the region. China also vowed to increase economic integration with the Middle East which has formed a key part of its global Belt and Road initiative.
The rise of a multipolar world seems destined to strengthen countries across the globe, economically as well as politically. In such a world, observers hope it will be harder for any one nation to dominate another, making it easier for countries like Iran and Pakistan to resolve differences peacefully.

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‘The Opposite of a Peace Formula’: Zelensky's Proposal for Russian Surrender Ridiculed

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky shared the highly aspirational plan at this year’s World Economic Forum summit in Davos.
Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky unveiled a diplomatic proposal to end the long-running conflict in the Donbass region this week, but observers say the controversial leader’s “peace formula” is little more than wishful thinking.
“It is the opposite of a peace formula,” said security analyst Mark Sleboda on Sputnik’s The Critical Hour programThursday. “It is a childish demand for Russian unconditional surrender that Russia should withdraw all of its troops from Ukrainian territory – including Crimea – [and] surrender the people of Crimea and Donbass to the tender mercies of Azov* Neo-Nazis.”
Among the elements of Zelensky’s proposition is a call for Russia to put political and military leaders on trial and pay reparations to the Kiev regime.
“And on there is Zelensky's demand for a little pink pony with a little pretty ribbon on top,” Sleboda added sarcastically. “This is a fantastical, maximalist demand. It is not a peace formula, which is why the Global South is just like, ‘Do we have to sit through another one of these things?’ And spoiler, China didn't even bother to show up.”
Zelensky unveiled the proposal at the World Economic Forum summit in Davos, Switzerland earlier this week. Sleboda noted the venue was likely chosen to improve attendance as Zelensky has struggled to find an audience for such speeches in recent months.

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Zelensky has released similar proposals in the past although none have gained traction given Ukraine's struggles on the battlefield. Sleboda noted that even The New York Times admitted Ukraine was losing, although indirectly.

"Even this article in the New York Times – if you scroll down into it long enough – they go through the list of demands and then they say 'all of these demands are considered by analysts and even politicians backing the proposal to be unreachable, given the current balance of forces on the battlefield.'" Sleboda pointed out. "Which is a nice way of saying the Kiev regime is losing."

Discussion then shifted towards Russia's recent targeting of mercenary fighters in Kharkov earlier this week. "Unfortunately for the mercenaries, things aren't working out real well for them on the battlefield," said host Garland Nixon. "Well, come to think of it, they're not getting to the battlefield."

Sleboda pointed out the alleged French mercenaries were reported to be working with the Russian Volunteers Corps, a neo-Nazi group that has been banned in Europe.

"This isn't like a safari tour in Afghanistan or Iraq or somewhere where they go out and kill some largely helpless villagers with AK-47s," said Sleboda. "You're fighting a world power that has ballistic cruise and hypersonic missiles dropping 1,500-pound, guided bombs on you and everything else."

"So yeah, newsflash: you don't belong here. And if you insist on coming here then you'll be priority target number one."

*Azov Battalion is a terrorist organization banned in Russia.

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UK Backing Israel With Spy Planes Over Gaza - Report

The revelation is likely to prove controversial as a recent poll showed 71% of the British public support a ceasefire in the besieged territory.

Late last year it was revealed the United Kingdom was supplying Israel with weapons from a base in Cyprus. Now new evidence is emerging of the lengths the country has gone to assist Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in his Gaza military campaign.

British Defense Minister Grant Shapps had previously admitted the UK was providing "surveillance support to Israel," although he couched the assistance in terms of "preventing the transfer of weapons to terrorist groups." Shapps later claimed the surveillance flights were intended to locate two British captives being held in Gaza.

But now it has emerged that the British Armed Forces have flown 50 surveillance flights over the besieged enclave since December alone. The flights departed from RAF Akrotiri, the UK's air force base in Cyprus.

The revelation is likely to prove controversial as the UK has been rocked by demonstrations protesting Israel's deadly military operation in Gaza, which has killed nearly 25,000 people in the territory. Thousands of Britons have taken to the streets even as the country's government has

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provoked free speech concerns by attempting to ban pro-Palestine protest chants. In France and Germany, authorities have banned some pro-Palestine demonstrations entirely.
The UK's embattled defense minister was recently widely ridiculed for a speech warning that the UK was at risk of attack from China, Russia, Iran and North Korea. Shapps was mocked for an address where he declared "the era of the peace dividend is over" – the United Kingdom has been perhaps the strongest supporter of US military interventions throughout the world.
🐴🎀⚫ Analyst Mark Sleboda mocked Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's "peace formula" unveiled in Davos this week, speculating the highly aspirational plan also included "Zelensky's demand for a little pink pony with a little pretty ribbon on top."

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"It is the opposite of a peace formula," said the expert on Sputnik's The Critical Hour program Thursday. "It is a childish demand for Russian unconditional surrender that Russia should withdraw all of its troops from Ukrainian territory – including Crimea – [and] surrender the people of Crimea and Donbass to the tender mercies of Azov Neo-Nazis."

Among the elements of Zelensky's proposition is a call for Russia to put political and military leaders on trial and pay reparations to the Kiev regime.

The proposal is highly unlikely to achieve traction with even The New York Times recognizing Ukraine's failure on the battlefield, Sleboda pointed out.

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"We have to remember that the Israelis have a long lasting relationship with ISIS* because ISIS during the Syrian Dirty War had bases alongside the Golan Heights," said international affairs expert Professor Mohammad Marandi on Sputnik's Fault Lines program Thursday.

The analyst discussed the destabilizing role of Israel and the United States in the Middle East as the death toll from Israel's campaign in Gaza approaches 25,000.

Iran angered Pakistani officials earlier this week when they launched an attack on terrorist bases over the country's border with Pakistan, but Marandi asserts Western intelligence agencies are ultimately to blame for supporting various anti-Iran groups.

The Israeli Defense Forces chief admitted in 2019 to supplying ISIS-aligned Syrian rebels with weapons, while the United States has long backed extremists in the region to undermine various geopolitical foes.

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* ISIS is a terrorist group banned in Russia and many other countries.

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British Defense Minister Grant Shapps had previously admitted the UK was providing "surveillance support to Israel," although he couched the assistance in terms of "preventing the transfer of weapons to terrorist groups."

Now it's been revealed that the British Armed Forces have flown 50 surveillance flights over the besieged Gaza Strip since December alone. The flights departed from RAF Akrotiri, the UK's air force base in Cyprus. The revelation comes after reports the UK had been shipping weapons to Netanyahu's regime from the base.

A recent poll showed 71% of the British public support a ceasefire in Gaza.

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US Removes Entities in China, Canada, UAE From 'Unverified List' - Commerce Department

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The United States has take three entities located in China, Canada and the United Arab Emirates off the Commerce Department's unverified list, according to a notice published in the Federal Register on Friday.

"This rule removes 'Skymount Drones' under the destination of Canada, 'Plexus (Xiamen) Co., Ltd.,' under the destination of China, and "Delma Industrial Supply & Marine Services" under the destination of the United Arab Emirates," the notice said.

Companies are placed on the US "unverified list" when US export control officers are unable to determine whether they can be trusted to receive US-origin technology. Typically this is a first step before companies are added to the Commerce Department's blacklist or "entity list."

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Canadian Businesses Want Govt. to Allow Them Access to Spy Agency Intelligence - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) – The Business Council of Canada (BCC) is pushing for legislative changes that would allow the country's spy agency to share threat-related intelligence with companies, The Canadian Press said on Friday.

The changes to the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) Act would allow the spy agency to share threat-related intelligence with groups and other authorities unrelated to the federal government, the report said, something that it is currently prohibited from doing by law.

Allowing CSIS to share intelligence with business would be useful because several BCC

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members find themselves being targeted by “malicious actors” who seek to undermine Canada through the sabotage of critical infrastructure, disruption of vital supply chains or theft of proprietary information, the President and CEO of the Business Council Goldy Hyder was quoted as saying in the report.

"The nefarious methods employed by these actors are wide-ranging, from the use of foreign intelligence officers and corporate insiders to state-affiliated hackers and seemingly benign joint ventures," Hyder said in a letter addressed to Public Safety Minister Dominic LeBlanc and obtained by The Canadian Press.

Hyder noted that with proper changes, CSIS could provide specific and tangible information to Canadian businesses, allowing their leaders to better grasp the nature of threats and adopt relevant security measures for their employees, customers and communities.

Moreover, the Council is also urging the federal government to create a new body whose purpose would be to ensure the secure and broad sharing of intelligence across the country’s economic spectrum, akin to the United States' Domestic Security Alliance BCC, the report said.

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US Democrats Mull Deal to Protect Johnson as Speaker to Pass Ukraine Aid

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US Democratic lawmakers are considering a deal to protect Mike Johnson as House Speaker in order to pass a national security supplemental request including aid to Ukraine, Politico reported on Friday.

Several Democrats, including Adam Smith, Bennie Thompson and Vicente Gonzalez, told the news outlet that if Johnson puts the Senate deal on the floor, some in their party would likely step in to ensure he remains the speaker.

"Our job is not to save Johnson, but I think it would be a mighty pity, if he did the right thing …

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for us not to support him," Thompson told Politico. "Up to this point, he's been a fairly honest broker."

Some Democrats, however, disagree and believe that Johnson would likely be asked to pay some sort of political ransom in the form of a power-sharing agreement, more committee seats or other rules changes, the report said.

US Congress and Biden administration officials have negotiated for weeks to reach a deal on supplemental funds to provide the White House with more than $100 billion in extra funds for Ukraine, Israel, and other priorities, including US border security.

Republican lawmakers have made it clear they will only support Biden's supplemental request if it includes meaningful policy changes to stop the influx of migrants arriving at the US southern border.

Johnson, after attending a meeting with President Joe Biden earlier this week, told reporters that the current status quo on Ukraine is unacceptable.

Johnson also said Congress needs a clearer explanation from the Biden administration about its strategy in Ukraine, the endgame, and accountability for US funds, adding that US border security must be the top priority.

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Biden Cancels Nearly $5Bln in Student Debt for 74,000 Borrowers

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Friday that he is canceling almost $5 billion in student debt for 74,000 borrowers, many of whom have worked in public sector jobs for over a decade, in a new student debt relief action.

"Today, my Administration approved debt cancellation for another 74,000 student loan borrowers across the country, bringing the total number of people who have gotten their debt cancelled under my Administration to over 3.7 million Americans through various actions," Biden said in a statement.

Of the 74,000 borrowers eligible for the new relief, nearly 44,000 are teachers, nurses, firefighters and other individuals who have worked over 10 years in public service jobs.

The other 30,000 are people who have been in repayment for at least 20 years but never got the relief they earned through income-driven repayment plans, Biden said.

The student relief action became possible due to fixes made to "broken" student loan programs that were preventing borrowers from getting relief they were entitled to under the law, Biden stated.

He also reaffirmed his commitment to continuing to pursue an alternative path to deliver student debt relief to as many borrowers as possible as quickly as possible, in the wake of the Supreme Court's decision blocking his initial proposal in June last year.

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with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Finance Officials Hold 'Frank' Talks With Chinese Counterparts in Beijing - Treasury

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - A delegation of US Treasury officials held a third round of talks with their Chinese counterparts in Beijing this week during which they "frankly raised" issues of disagreement between the two sides, the Treasury Department said in a press release on Friday.

"The meeting sessions included discussions on financial stability and capital markets issues, international financial institutions, sustainable finance, cross-border payments and data, and anti-money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism (AML/CFT). US officials also frankly raised areas of disagreement during the conversations. The meetings concluded with both sides agreeing to continue to meet regularly," the release said.

During the January 18-19 meeting in Beijing, the finance officials also met with Vice Premier He Lifeng and conveyed that Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen "looks forward to a return visit to China at the appropriate time," the release said.

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Orthodox Hierarchs, Activists Create Human Rights Group on Persecutions in Ukraine

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - Hierarchs of different Christian Orthodox churches and human rights activists have created a new association to attract the international community's attention to the growing persecution of Christians in Ukraine, Metropolitan Mark of Berlin and Germany from the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCOR) told Sputnik.

"The canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) is practically prohibited from acting as a religious community, it is not allowed to have any church buildings, and its priests are a priori made criminals. So, we are trying to bring this to the attention of people who fight for human rights to make them aware that the European regulations are not being adhered to in any way in Ukraine with respect to the Orthodox church," Metropolitan Mark said.

The metropolitan emphasized that the human rights violations in Ukraine are very serious and pointed out that only the canonical Orthodox church in the country has no rights whatsoever.

"No rights of any kind, which is totally against all kinds of human rights norms," he said.

The association, named Church Against Xenophobia and Religious Discrimination, includes a number of hierarchs, clergymen, human rights activists and lawyers from the UOC, the Orthodox Church of Jerusalem, ROCOR and others.

The metropolitan added that the UOC was forced by the Ukrainian authorities to cease all relations with the Russian Orthodox Church.

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ROCOR Hierarch Says Does Not Expect Any Justice in Appeals Court Hearing in Ukraine

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - Ukrainian courts do not encourage hope that justice will be attained with respect to discrimination and crimes against the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), bishop of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad Metropolitan Mark of Berlin and Germany told Sputnik.

"I do not expect any justice from any court in Ukraine. This is a country totally steeped in prosecuting Christians," Metropolitan Mark said.

The metropolitan made the remarks when asked to comment on the upcoming hearing at the Court of Appeals in Ukraine regarding the case of Metropolitan Jonathan (Yeletskikh) of Tulchin and Bratslav.

Last August, Metropolitan Jonathan was sentenced by the Vinnytsia City Court to five years in prison and confiscation of his property. The appeal hearing is scheduled for January 22.

Metropolitan Mark called on believers to pray for Metropolitan Jonathan's well-being and to attain justice in the case.

"We, Christians in the free world, will naturally continue to insist on the right of the UOC to exist. They [the Ukrainian authorities] do not even recognize the church's right to exist," Metropolitan Mark said.

The situation concerning freedom of religion in Ukraine is now worse than what it was in the former Soviet Union, and can be compared to the persecution of Christians in the first centuries

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of Christianity, Metropolitan Mark added.

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World Bodies Ignoring Requests on Religious Rights Violations in Ukraine - Bishop

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) – International bodies have neglected to respond to multiple requests from Orthodox churches, lawyers and activists to address egregious violations of religious rights in Ukraine, bishop of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCOR) Metropolitan Mark of Berlin and Germany told Sputnik.

The international human rights association Church Against Xenophobia and Religious Discrimination has called on multinational actors including UN special mandate holders such as the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN Human Rights Council to make efforts to stop the persecution of the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

"So far, we have received no reaction at all," Metropolitan Mark, a member of the association, said.

The association says that UN representatives have repeatedly drawn attention to the critical situation in Ukraine and repeated violations of the rights of the UOC. However, activists say the response from UN bodies remains insufficient.

Metropolitan Mark stressed that only the international community can resolve the problem and force Ukrainian authorities to respect the rights of the UOC and its members. "Only international organizations can do something in order to improve this situation," he said.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Turk said in December that actions of the Ukrainian authorities against the UOC and the bill proposing the dissolution of religious organizations associated with Russia are contrary to freedom of religion and international law.

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Orthodox Hierarchs, Activists Create Human Rights Group on Persecutions in Ukraine

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The metropolitan emphasized that the human rights violations in Ukraine are very serious and

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The association, named Church Against Xenophobia and Religious Discrimination, includes a number of hierarchs, clergymen, human rights activists and lawyers from the UOC, the Orthodox Church of Jerusalem, ROCOR and others.
The metropolitan added that the UOC was forced by the Ukrainian authorities to cease all relations with the Russian Orthodox Church.

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US Defense Secretary Summoned to Testify Before Congress About Hospitalization - Letter

(Updates with details in paras 3,4; background in paras 5,6)
WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US House Armed Services Chairman Mike Rogers in a letter demanded US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin appear before the panel for a testimony to discuss the lack of transparency of his hospitalization earlier this month.
"Your unwillingness to provide candid and complete answers necessitates calling a Full Committee hearing on February 14, 2024, where the Committee expects to hear your direct testimony regarding decisions made to withhold information from the President, Congress, and the American people," Rogers said in the letter on Thursday.
Rogers said that although Austin did respond to some of his questions on this matter, several others were not addressed. Rogers highlighted that he was "alarmed" Austin refused to answer whether he instructed his staff to not inform President Joe Biden or anyone else about his hospitalization.
The Congressman asked Austin to provide a written response to additional questions about his failure to disclose his hospitalization by February 7.
Austin was hospitalized on January 1 due to an infection, following prostate cancer surgery in late December and has not been in office since then.
The US Defense Department failed to communicate Austin’s hospitalization to the White House for several days, prompting a Pentagon Inspector General probe and bipartisan calls for him to leave his leadership position.

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US House Democrat Calls on Biden to Do More to Deter Illegal Migration on Southern Border

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Henry Cuellar said he is urging President Joe Biden to impose consequences on migrants illegally crossing the US southern border into the United States as a means to deter record levels of immigration in the region.

""We got to show consequences at the border because as long as people think that all they have to do is touch the border and then they can come into the US, which is happening, then people are going to continue to come," Cuellar, a Democrat from Texas, told the Washington Post on Thursday.

Cuellar said he, Texas Governor Greg Abbott and others have been frustrated with this "open type of borders" that has been unfolding on the US southern border.

It is the responsibility of the US federal government to deal with the situation, Cuellar added.

The US National Border Patrol Council told Sputnik that a majority of illegal migrants apprehended on the US southern border are released into the United States using a loophole in the country's asylum system.

Earlier this month, US media reported that border security officials documented 302,000 migrant encounters in December, marking the highest single-month figure ever recorded. The Biden administration has also experienced three consecutive years of record numbers of illegal immigration on the southern border.

Republicans are currently trying to get the White House to agree to make meaningful changes to US border security that will end the border crisis in exchange for support of Biden's supplemental request that includes more than $60 billion for Ukraine aid.

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US Candidates Who Want More War Spending Will Lose in November- Former Virginia Senator

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US presidential candidates who want more money to be spent on wars will lose in the upcoming elections in November, former Virginia State Senator Richard Black told Sputnik.

"Americans are tired of war," Black stated. "Candidates who want more war spending will lose votes in November."

When asked about the US public and the government's support for Ukraine, Black said, "For the time being, funds for Ukraine are going nowhere. There's a general recognition that Ukraine

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will not win the war. In order to keep the cash flowing, Biden is considering giving to Ukraine those funds belonging to Russia that were deposited in Western banks," he explained. "I don't know what allows U.S. banks to give away deposits to third parties, but most people would call that grand theft."

US Congress and Biden administration officials have negotiated for weeks to reach a deal on supplemental funds to provide the White House with more than $106 billion in extra funds for Ukraine, Israel, and other priorities, including US border security.

"People expect Trump to win the presidential election and end the slaughter in Ukraine. He is not hostile toward President Putin or to Russia," Black said. "Congress has lost interest in Ukraine; their attention is on Gaza now."

Republican lawmakers have made it clear they will only support Biden's supplemental request if it includes meaningful policy changes to stop the influx of migrants arriving at the US southern border.

US House Speaker Mike Johnson, after attending the meeting with Biden, told reporters that the US status quo on Ukraine is unacceptable.

Johnson further said Congress needs a clearer explanation from the Biden administration about its strategy in Ukraine, the endgame, and accountability for US funds, adding that US border security must be the top priority.

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Один человек погиб и 4 тяжело ранены в результате стрельбы в Сан-Франциско - полиция

САН-ФРАНЦИСКО, 19 янв - РИА Новости. Один человек погиб, еще четыре находятся в критическом состоянии в результате стрельбы в калифорнийском городе Сан-Франциско, сообщил городской департамент полиции, заявление которого поступило в распоряжении РИА Новости.

Согласно заявлению, сотрудники полиции Сан-Франциско в четверг прибыли в район улиц Хайд-стрит и Терк-стрит после сообщения о стрельбе. На месте инцидента были обнаружены четверо мужчин и одна женщина с огнестрельными ранениями.

"Полицейские оказали раненым помощь и вызвали медиков на место происшествия. Все пятеро пострадавших были доставлены в больницу в критическом состоянии", - говорится в заявлении.

Отмечается, что один из пострадавших мужчин скончался от ранений, несмотря на усилия сотрудников скорой помощи.

Газета San Francisco Chronicle называет район, в котором произошла стрельба, одним из мест, где процветает наркоторговля.

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European Space Agency Making 'Huge Effort' to Attract Private Industry - Aschbacher

DAVOS, January 19 (Sputnik), Lenka White - The European Space Agency (ESA) is putting a great effort into attracting venture capital funds for use in space endeavors, ESA Director General Josef Aschbacher told Sputnik.

"A lot has happened in terms of the private economy," Aschbacher said. "In ESA, we are putting huge effort into promoting it, [trying] to get venture capital coming into industry outside the public funding."

Aschbacher noted that the private sector "is going very fast and everywhere" and the effort really is to attract private companies to specific space-related endeavors.

"This is very important at the moment," Aschbacher said, adding that he also personally considers such private sector involvement very important as well.

Asked if ESA cooperates with the Russian space agency Roscosmos, Aschbacher said it does not as a result of the sanctions that the collective West imposed on Russia.

However, cooperation on the International Space Station is "very flawless," Aschbacher said.

Aschbacher and ESA astronaut Matthias Maurer spoke earlier at the "Artificial Intelligence and Space" event at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

The 2024 edition of the World Economic Forum is taking place from January 15-19. About 2,800 attendees from some 120 countries are participating in the WEF, including prominent figures from business, political and academic circles.

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High-Level US Delegation Heads to Mexico for 'Productive' Talks on Migration - Official

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will lead a high-level delegation to Mexico for "productive" talks on addressing the challenge of irregular migration in the region, a senior US administration official told reporters.

"We expect a productive conversation that will build on progress made during our meeting in Mexico City on December 27," the official said on Thursday.

Both sides will use the meeting to work towards finding a "humane and lawful" way to manage regional migration, the official added.

The official noted that no big announcements are expected out of the meeting.

Earlier this month, US media reported that border security officials documented 302,000 migrant encounters in December, marking the highest single-month figure ever recorded. The Biden administration has also experienced three consecutive years of record numbers of illegal migration on the southern border.

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Shooting in San Francisco Leaves One Dead, Four Critically Injured - Statement

SAN FRANCISCO, January 19 (Sputnik)- San Francisco Police Department (SFPD) officers discovered four adult male victims and one adult female victim with gunshot wounds, SFPD said in a statement to Sputnik.

"Officers located 4 adult male victims and 1 adult female victim suffering from apparent gunshot wounds," SFPD said in a statement on Thursday.

According to the statement, on Thursday, San Francisco Police officers responded to the area of Hyde and Turk Streets following a report of a shooting.

"Officers rendered aid and summoned paramedics to the scene. All 5 of the victims were transported to the hospital with life-threatening injuries," the statement said.

Furthermore, despite the efforts of first responders and medical staff, one of the male victims mentioned in the statement succumbed to injuries and was pronounced dead at the hospital, the statement said.

The statement added that investigators from the SFPD Homicide Detail are leading the ongoing open and active investigation.

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Axiom-3 Successfully Launches Next Four Astronaut Crew on Next Manned Mission to ISS

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The Axiom-3 mission four-man next crew of astronauts to fly to the International SpaceStation (ISS) launched successfully at 4:59 pm Eastern Standard Time (EST) on a SpaceX Dragon spacecraft atop a Falcon 9 booster from Kennedy Space Center: The launch was broadcast live.

Second stage separated successfully also on schedule and the spacecraft then entered orbit in optimum mode, SpaceX said on Thursday.

The Ax-3 mission took off from Launch Complex 39A at NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida. The crew is travelling to the ISS and is scheduled to dock there on Saturday.

The Ax-3 crew members are Commander Michael López-Alegría, Pilot Walter Villadei of Italy, Mission Specialist Alper Gezeravcı of Turkey, and ESA (European Space Agency) project astronaut Marcus Wandt of Sweden. They ill join the seven cosmonauts and astronauts currently on board the space station.

Ax-3 is the first all-European commercial crew sent to the ISS and the mission is financed by Axiom Space, a Houston-based company flying its third group of paying passengers to the station.

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Trump Campaign Vows to Fight Other Cases After Washington State Keeps Trump on Ballot

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The Trump campaign is committed to challenging all US states that attempt to remove former President Donald Trump from their state primary ballots, spokesperson Steven Cheung announced.

Earlier on Thursday, a US judge rejected efforts to remove Trump from Washington State's primary ballot for the upcoming presidential election in November.

"Although the judge made the correct decision in this matter, we remain steadfast in our opposition to these cases, which are orchestrated by Democrat Party allies of failed president crooked Joe Biden and we resolve to fight any and all remaining bad-faith, election-interfering sham cases wherever they reside," Cheung said in a press release on Thursday.

A fair ruling on these issues by the US Supreme Court could put all "unconstitutional misinterpretations" of the 14th Amendment to rest , Cheung added.

The states of Michigan, Minnesota and Oregon have also rejected efforts to remove Trump from the state primary ballots.

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Austin Discusses Need to Accelerate Gaza Aid, Protect Civilians With Gallant - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin discussed the need to accelerate the delivery of aid to the Gaza Strip and protect civilians with Israeli counterpart Yoav Gallant, Pentagon Press Secretary Pat Ryder said in a statement.

“The Secretary emphasized the need to accelerate humanitarian assistance across Gaza and protect civilians,” the statement said on Thursday.

Austin and Gallant also discussed Israel’s transition to low-intensity operations in the Gaza Strip, the statement said. Austin also reiterated the United States’ resolve to prevent the conflict from escalating, the statement said.

Israel’s operations in the Gaza Strip come following an attack on the country by Hamas militants on October 7, which has led to tens of thousands of Israelis and Palestinians dying as a result of fighting.

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Axiom-3 Successfully Launches 4 Astronaut Crew on Next Manned Mission to ISS

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The Axiom-3 mission four-man next crew of astronauts to fly to the International Space Station (ISS) launched successfully at 4:59 p.m. EST on a SpaceX Dragon spacecraft atop a Falcon 9 booster rocket from Kennedy Space Center.

Second stage separated successfully also on schedule and the spacecraft then entered orbit in

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optimum mode, SpaceX said.

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Hunter Biden to Appear in Congress for Deposition on February 28 - Judiciary Committee

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's son, Hunter Biden, will appear before Congress for a deposition on February 28, the Judiciary Committee and the House Committee on Oversight and Accountability said in a joint release on Thursday.
"Hunter Biden will appear before our committees for a deposition on February 28, 2024. His deposition will come after several interviews with Biden family members and associates. We look forward to Hunter Biden's testimony," the release said.

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US House Passes Government Funding Extension, Sending Bill to Biden for Finalization

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed a continuing resolution (CR) to extend temporary government funding into March and give lawmakers more time to pass appropriations bills, sending the legislation to US President Joe Biden's desk.
US House lawmakers passed the legislation on Thursday in a vote of 314-108. The US Senate passed the bill earlier on Thursday, placing it on track to be finalized by Biden.
The US Congress had until January 19 to pass a government funding measure or the government would begin to shut down. In November, lawmakers passed a so-called "laddered" CR, which temporarily funded separate portions of the government through January 19 and February 2.
The CR passed by Congress on Thursday extends the temporary funding to March 1 and 8.

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Senior State Dept Official Says US Has Advised Cuba Against Collaborating with China

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - A senior State Department official told Congress that Washington has advised Cuba against cooperating with China and believes its diplomatic efforts have slowed down Beijing's efforts to sustain its military power on the island.
"We've advised Cuba on several levels that it's not in its interest to collaborate with the PRC on problematic activity," Deputy Assistant Secretary Eric Jacobstein said in congressional testimony on Thursday. "We assess that our diplomatic outreach on this topic has slowed down

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the PRC's efforts to project and sustain its military power in Cuba and around the world."
The US broke off diplomatic relations with Cuba in the 1960s and imposed a trade embargo on the island nation.
Former President Barack Obama took steps to normalize bilateral relations with Cuba, but the policy was reversed by his successor, Donald Trump, who leveled 243 additional economic sanctions on Havana, tightened travel regulations and placed the island nation back on the list of countries sponsoring terrorism.
Current President Joe Biden promised that he would restore Obama's policy on Cuba but has instead extended the restrictions against the country.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, January 19 (Sputnik) -

US STRIKES AGAINST HOUTHIS
* The United States has conducted another round of strikes against Yemen's Houthis, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Thursday.
* President Joe Biden said the United States will continue to launch strikes on Yemen but acknowledged they were not effective in deterring Houthi attacks on ships in the Red Sea, according to White House pool reporters.
* The strikes of the United States and the United Kingdom will not affect the military capabilities of the Houthis, the movement's leader Abdul Malik al-Houthi said.
* The United States and the United Kingdom have violated all the norms of international law by launching strikes against Yemen, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.

ISRAEL INVASION OF GAZA
* Israel will not accept anything less than a victory over the Palestinian movement Hamas, so the fighting will continue, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Thursday.
* Arab countries intend to soon present a plan to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and create a Palestinian state, the Financial Times reported, citing a senior Arab official.
* Russia knows about the "partially secret" contacts on Palestinian-Israeli settlement with the participation of the United States, Israel and some Arab states, but they will not be successful, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.

ARMS CONTROL
* The United States believes Russia may be willing to negotiate on the New START Treaty as the accord nears expiration in 2026, a senior National Security Council official said on Thursday.
* The United States seeks that China respond to its ideas on nuclear risk reduction, the official said.
* The United States has not received meaningful feedback from Russia with regard to its

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proposal on arms control, the National Security Council said.
* The United States has several avenues to engage with Russia in multilateral formats and hopes that Moscow is willing to engage, the National Security Council said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE
* French ambassador to Russia Pierre Levy was summoned to the Russian Foreign Ministry in connection with the destruction by the Russian armed forces of the station of foreign fighters in Kharkiv, among whom were the French citizens, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova told Sputnik on Thursday.
* Members of the European Parliament said the EU had previously made "political commitments" and was now obliged to agree on long-term financing for Ukraine.
* Ukraine has lost more than 260 soldiers both killed and injured in the Donetsk direction over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.
* Reports that Russia and Ukraine allegedly launched negotiations in Geneva are rumors, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.

IRAN-PAKISTAN TENSIONS
* Iran condemns Pakistan's attack on the Iranian territory and considers it to be "disproportionate" and "unacceptable," the Foreign Ministry said on Thursday.
* Ten Pakistani citizens have been killed in a Pakistani missile attack on Iran, Alireza Marhamati, provincial deputy governor for security and law enforcement of the Iranian province of Sistan and Baluchestan said.
* Russia calls on Iran and Pakistan to exercise maximum restraint and resolve emerging issues exclusively through political and diplomatic means, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Zakharova said.
* Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan has held phone conversations with his Iranian and Pakistani counterparts, calling for an early de-escalation, a Turkish diplomatic source told Sputnik.
* Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said he hopes that the escalation of tensions between Iran and Pakistan will not complicate the international efforts on settling the situation in Afghanistan.

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Oral Solution for Children Fever, Pain Recalled Over Overdose Risks – Health Canada

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) – Teva Canada Ltd. has recalled one of its lots of Pediatrix Acetaminophen Oral Solution after concerns arose over potential overdose risks related to its consumption among children, Health Canada said.
"Teva Canada Ltd. is recalling one lot of Pediatrix Acetaminophen Oral Solution after routine product testing found a higher than acceptable amount of acetaminophen in the affected lot … This could lead to children receiving too much acetaminophen," the health authority said in a

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public advisory on Wednesday.

Health Canada said that the amount of acetaminophen in the solution is approximately 185mg/5mL rather than the approved and labeled 160mn/5mL, and further noted that children are notably more at risk to the effects of an overdose due to their smaller size.

Symptoms of an overdose include nausea, vomiting, lethargy, and pain in the upper part of the abdomen or stomach, among others. Abdominal pain could be a sign of liver damage which in turn may result in liver failure or even death, Health Canada added.

Pediatrix is available without prescription at drug stores and is used to treat mild to moderate fever and pain in children aged 2-11, Health Canada said. The recall as well as the implementation of corrective and preventive measures are being monitored, it added.

The recall is not expected to cause any impact on the availability of children's acetaminophen products in Canada, the health authority continued.

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US Failing to Support Cuba Private Sector Would Leave Space for Russia, China - State Dept

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The United States believes that if it fails to support the private sector in Cuba, it would allow Russia and China to shape the island's economy, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Central America Eric Jacobstein said on Thursday.

"We believe the organic expansion of the private sector on the island – led by the Cuban people themselves and not by any foreign government – is an opportunity that should not be wasted," Jacobstein said. "Failing to engage and support Cuba's private sector would leave space for Russia and the PRC to shape the direction of the Cuban economy."

Jacobstein stressed that Washington must not allow this to happen.

"Cuban entrepreneurs prefer US values and our economic model and see the United States as their business partner of choice," he said. "We are focused on taking measures that inject a real sense of hope among the Cuban people and stem the tide of worsening humanitarian and migration conditions – all while remaining steadfast in promoting accountability for the Cuban government's continued abuses."

The US broke off diplomatic relations with Cuba in the 1960s and imposed a trade embargo on the island nation.

Former President Barack Obama took steps to normalize bilateral relations with Cuba, but the policy was reversed by his successor, Donald Trump, who leveled 243 additional economic sanctions on Cuba, tightened travel regulations and placed the island nation back on the list of countries sponsoring terrorism.

Current President Joe Biden promised that he would restore Obama's policy on Cuba but has instead extended the restrictions against the country.

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with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Ottawa Nunavut Ink Deal on Largest Land Transfer in Country's History – Trudeau Office

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) – Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Nunavut's Premier P.J. Akeeagok signed on Thursday the Nunavut Lands and Resources Devolution Agreement, the largest single land transfer deal in the country's history, Trudeau's Office said.

The land transfer agreement was signed by Trudeau, Akeeagok, Canada's Minister of Northern Affairs Dan Vandal, and the President of Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated Aluki Kotierk.

"With the agreement, Nunavut and its residents will now be able to make decisions about how public lands, freshwater, and non-renewable resources are used in the territory, and reap the benefits of responsible and sustainable resource development", the Office said adding that it is the largest land transfer in the country's history.

Accordingly, the land devolution will generate Northern-led employment, investments, and other opportunities whose purpose is the development and prosperity of Nunavut for generations to come.

The agreement aims at supporting the Territory's priorities, the Office said, further noting that federal and territorial authorities would continue to work in close partnership until the lands full transfer in April 1, 2027.

"We will continue to work together to empower Nunavut over its economic future, strengthen the Inuit-Crown relationship, and ensure a better, brighter future for all those who call Nunavut home," the Office continued.

Land devolution is an essential step toward the reconciliation between Canada and its Indigenous population the Office said, as well as for the Nunavut's political and economic development.

Nunavut was officially created in 1999 following its separation from the Northwest Territories, providing for the establishment of an independent Inuit government. It is Canada's largest and most northernmost territory.

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Pentagon Says US Used F-18 Fighter Aircraft in Latest Airstrikes on Houthis in Yemen

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The US used Navy F-18 fighter aircraft to conduct its latest airstrikes on Yemen, Deputy Pentagon Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said on Thursday.

"That was a Navy fighter aircraft that was used, F-18s," Singh said during a press briefing when asked about the type of fighter jets used in the latest strike.

The White House earlier said the United States conducted another round of strikes earlier in the day against Ansar Allah, also known as Houthis.

The Houthis, who control large territories in Yemen's center-west and north, vowed in November 2023 to attack any ships associated with Israel until it halts military actions in the Gaza Strip.

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This led US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin to announce the creation of a multinational operation to secure navigation in the Red Sea. US and UK forces launched major strikes against Houthi positions last week in a bid to degrade the movement's ability to target commercial vessels.

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Israeli Envoy Says Canada Should Leave 'No Room for Misinterpretation' on ICJ Case Stance

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) – Israeli Ambassador in Ottawa Iddo Moed said on Thursday that Canada must leave "no room for misinterpretation" when it comes to its stance on the genocide case brought by South Africa against the Jewish state before the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

On Wednesday, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau declined to elaborate on what Ottawa would do in the event that the ICJ finds Israel guilty of genocide. He reiterated his previous comments, saying that although Canada supports the ICJ and its processes, it does not agree with the premise of the genocide case brought forward by South Africa.

The prime minister, however, said that Ottawa was "watching carefully" as the process at the ICJ unfolded.

"At a time when the world's leading liberal democracies and many of Canada's closest allies and G7 members – including the United States, United Kingdom, France, Italy and Germany – are unequivocally rejecting South Africa's cynical application, Israel urges Canada to leave no room for misinterpretation on a matter that is crystal clear," Moed said in a statement.

The envoy's comment echoes remarks he made during a Sunday interview, when he said that Israel would have preferred a stronger statement by Trudeau. The ambassador stated, however, that Canada has been "very clear" about its support for Israel's right to exist and to defend itself in accordance with international law.

South Africa filed a lawsuit with the ICJ in December, accusing Israel of genocidal intent in Gaza amid a rising civilian death toll in the besieged Palestinian enclave. It seeks to prove that Israel's military campaign is genocidal in nature and targets Gazans as a part of the broader Palestinian people.

On January 11-12, the top United Nations court in The Hague held public hearings on South Africa's suit. In its address, South Africa's representatives urged the ICJ to obligate Israel to end its military operation in the Gaza Strip, ensure that the enclave's residents have access to food, water and humanitarian aid, and abstain from actions that could worsen the situation. Israel, for its part, argued that the escalation of conflict in the Gaza Strip started with Hamas' October 7 attack and insisted on its right to self-defense.

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Exporter Jailed For Two Years For Breaking US Sanctions on Iran - Justice Department

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - A resident of the US state of Virginia has received a two-year jail sentence for breaking federal sanctions by exporting construction machinery to Iran, the Department of Justice announced on Thursday.

"Jalal Hajavi, 60, of Sterling, Virginia, was sentenced by US District Judge Thomas Thrash to two years in prison to be followed by three years of supervised release," the release said. "He was convicted by a jury on September 11, 2023."

Hajavi was sentenced for conspiring to violate the International Emergency Economic Powers Act and the Iranian Transactions and Sanctions Regulations by smuggling heavy equipment such as bobcats and wheel loaders from the United States to Iran.

He was also convicted of unlawfully exporting and re-exporting goods from the United States to Iran without a license, the Justice Department said.

"Hajavi's conduct was particularly egregious because he was previously informed on at least two occasions that his conduct was prohibited. Instead of heeding the warnings, he continued to divert US goods to Iran," US Attorney Ryan Buchanan said in the release.

Hajavi smuggled the restricted goods through the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to Iran and caused a shipping company to submit false information to the US government, Assistant Attorney General Matthew Olsen said in the release.

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Pentagon Says Still No Date for Austin's Return to Office, Continues to Work From Home

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) – The date of US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin's return to office remains unknown as he continues to recuperate following hospitalization in early January and work from home, Pentagon deputy spokesperson Sabrina Singh said on Thursday.

"The secretary remains working from home. He has been participating in meetings here in the building, joining remotely either by phone or by video. I don't have a date of when he'd be back in the Pentagon," Singh said during a press briefing.

Austin was hospitalized on January 1 due to an infection, following prostate cancer surgery in late December and has not been in office since then.

The US Defense Department failed to communicate Austin's hospitalization to the White House for several days, prompting a Pentagon Inspector General probe and bipartisan calls for him to leave his leadership position.

In a poll on Wednesday, more than one-third of likely voters in the United States said that Austin should resign due to recent health problems.

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US Believes Normalization Between Saudi Arabia, Israel Still Possible - State Dept

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The United States believes that normalization is still possible between Saudi Arabia and Israel, State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"We have seen the government of Israel want to engage with its neighbors. You've seen the government of Israel normalize relationships with a number of its neighbors already, and it wants to pursue further integration," Miller said. "It wants obviously to normalize relations with Saudi Arabia, and we have been making progress on that and we believe progress is still possible to normalize relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia."

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said earlier in January that he discussed with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman the issue or resuming normalization talks with Israel, adding that there is still a clear interest in pursuing the initiative.

US Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Near East Affairs Barbara Leaf said during a congressional hearing in the beginning of January that the US-led Saudi-Israel normalization negotiations are on pause given the ongoing crisis in the Middle East, but they are expected to resume after the crisis ends.

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US Forces in Iraq, Syria Attacked 140 Times Since October 17 – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) – US forces in Iraq and Syria have been attacked 140 times in Iraq and Syria since October 17 following a new wave of escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Pentagon deputy spokesperson Sabrina Singh said on Thursday.

"To date, there have been approximately 140 attacks on US troops in Iraq and Syria: 57 attacks in Iraq and 83 attacks in Syria," Singh said during a press briefing.

The Pentagon reported nearly 70 military personnel wounded and 1 non-combatant contractor dead as a result of the attacks.

The wave of attacks on US forces in Iraq and Syria comes amid heightened tensions in the region, following an attack on Israel by Palestinian Hamas militants in October, as well as an increase in incidents involving US warships in the Red Sea.

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White House Says There Have Been Too Many Civilian Casualties in Gaza

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - There have been too many civilian casualties in Gaza, White House Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby said on Thursday.

"One civilian casualty is one too many. And there have been too many, and we have talked to

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them [Israel] about that as well in terms of tailoring their operations to be more discriminate, more cautious or careful," Kirby said during a press conference.

The death toll from Israeli strikes on the Gaza Strip since October 7, when the Israel-Hamas conflict escalated, has reached 24,285 while the number of injured is 61,154. The White House has been vocal about demanding that Israel minimize casualties and suffering among Palestinians, with Kirby saying earlier this week that the "right time" has come for Israel to reduce its involvement in the Gaza war.

On October 7, Palestinian movement Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip while its fighters breached the border, attacking both civilian neighborhoods and military bases. As a result, over 1,200 people in Israel were killed and some 240 others abducted. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza, and launched a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages.

On November 24, Qatar mediated a deal between Israel and Hamas on a temporary truce and the exchange of some of the prisoners and hostages, as well as the delivery of humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip. The ceasefire was extended several times and expired on December 1.

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US Senate Passes Government Funding Extension Bill, Sending to House for Consideration

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Thursday passed a continuing resolution (CR) to extend temporary government funding and give lawmakers more time to pass appropriations bills, sending the legislation to the House of Representatives for consideration.

Senators passed the legislation in a vote of 77-18. House lawmakers are set to take up the bill later on Thursday. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer expressed confidence that the House will also pass the legislation.

In November, the US Congress passed a so-called "laddered" CR, which temporarily funded separate portions of the government through January 19 and February 2. The CR passed by the Senate would extend the funding deadlines to March 1 and 8.

Prior to passing the legislation on Thursday, the Senate rejected an amendment to the bill by Sen. Rand Paul, which would have restricted assistance to Palestinian governing entities in the West Bank or the Gaza Strip.

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State Dept. Urges Restraint After Iran, Pakistan Exchange Strikes

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The United States is concerned about increased tensions in the region amid the Iran-Pakistan escalation and calls for both sides to exercise

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restraint, State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Thursday.

"We are concerned about escalating tensions in the region," Miller said during a briefing. "We noted the comments from the Government of Pakistan about the importance of cooperative relations between Pakistan and its neighbors. We thought those were productive, useful statements and certainly there's no need for escalation and we would urge restraint on all sides in this case."

Iran and Pakistan exchanged deadly cross border strikes this week, targeting what they said were militant hideouts.

The attacks come as the region continues to reel from the bloodshed in the Gaza Strip.

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UPDATE - US House Holds Final Hearing into Impeaching Homeland Security Secretary

(Updates in paras 6-7 with details from hearing, background in para 8)

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) – The US House Homeland Security Committee held its second and final hearing on Thursday on potentially impeaching Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas.

“This hearing is about the human costs of Secretary Mayorkas’ egregious misconduct and failure to fulfill his oath of office,” Chairman Mark Green said in opening remarks.

Ranking Member Bennie Thompson disputed Green’s contention that Mayorkas was refusing to testify before the committee, saying that he had testified before Congress more than any other cabinet secretary and agreed in a letter to testify at a mutually convenient date.

Thompson also argued that the threat of impeachment was a partisan, predetermined move, saying that “you cannot impeach a cabinet secretary because you don't like a president's policies. That's not put impeachment is for.”

The committee reportedly plans to vote on January 31 on an impeachment resolution.

During Thursday's hearing, lawmakers heard from three witnesses who were described by the committee as "victims" of illegal immigration.

The witnesses included two mothers, one whose daughter was raped and killed by an illegal immigrant, and another whose daughter died as a result of overdosing on fentanyl.

The impeachment probe comes amid a record surge in illegal immigration on the US southern border. According to media reports, US officials documented 302,000 migrant encounters on the US southern border in December, the highest figure recorded in a single month.

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US Raises With Israel Issue of Destroying Palestinian University in Gaza - State Dept.

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WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The United States is raising with Israel the issue of the latter demolishing the Al-Israa University in the Gaza Strip, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Thursday.

Earlier in the day, Wafa News Agency published a video of Israeli forces leveling the Al-Israa University by using more than 300 mines.

"It is something we are raising with the government of Israel," Miller said during a press briefing when asked to comment on the video.

The Al-Israa University facilities housed undergraduate and graduate schools as well as a national museum containing more than 3000 archaeological artifacts.

More than 26,000 Palestinians have so far been killed in Gaza and well over 60,000 others have been wounded during Israel's bombardments and invasion of the Palestinian enclave since October 7.

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Ottawa to Work With Quebec on Challenges Posed by Surge in Asylum Seekers - Minister

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government is committed to working with the Province of Quebec to address the challenges posed by a surge in asylum seeking immigrants entering Canada through the province, Public Safety Minister Dominic LeBlanc said on Thursday.

"We are taking the most recent financial request from the Quebec government very seriously," Leblanc said via the social media platform X. "We are committed to working with the government of Quebec to find solutions to the challenges posed by the significant number of asylum seekers that Quebec receives."

LeBlanc noted that the Canadian government has through the years deployed several measures to support Quebec on the matter, such as paying C$374 million ($278 million) for expenses related to temporary accommodations in the period 2017-2020.

The federal government has also provided annual immigration financial transfers worth $518 million and another $2.7 billion granted through the Canada Social Transfer, LeBlanc said.

The federal government has been examining measures necessary to ensuring the integrity of the Canadian immigration system, which include considering the possibility of asylum seekers being allowed to move to other provinces.

Earlier on Wednesday, Quebec Premier Francois Legault sent a letter to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in which he described the provinces "unsustainable situation" amid what he characterized as the excessive arrival of asylum seekers.

Legault told Trudeau that he would like the federal government to reimburse $348 million that Quebec spent on asylum seekers in 2021 and 2022, noting that he wants the government to continue doing so in the future.

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with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Awaiting China Response to Nuclear Risk Reduction Ideas - NSC

(Adds background in paras 5-7)
WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The United States is seeking for China to respond to its ideas on nuclear risk reduction, according to a senior National Security Council official on Thursday.
"On the arms control front, we really want to see China respond to some of our more substantive ideas on risk reduction, and we're still waiting to see if they will," Pranay Vaddi, special assistant to the president and National Security Council senior director for arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation, said at a CSIS event.
Vaddi noted that it was "really good obviously to see the mil-to-mil communications resumed as well, because our emphasis for so long has been really on strategic risk reduction."
However, beyond maintaining open lines of communication, "as it relates to arms control, we want to see some practical measures start to get discussed in these venues," he said.
The United States has repeatedly said it wants to have contacts with China on arms control to reduce risks and avoid miscalculation. Unlike the Trump administration, the Biden administration did not start off with the concept of bringing China into the New START Treaty, citing existing challenges in bringing Beijing into that agreement.
In an interview with Sputnik in December, Russian Permanent Representative to International Organizations in Vienna Mikhail Ulyanov said that Russia will not be seeking China's participation in a New START successor treaty but will not object if Beijing decides to join.
France and the United Kingdom, however, must be part of any New START successor treaty, the diplomat stated.

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Biden Believes Most of Congress Backs New Ukraine Aid, But Says Small Group Could Block It

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden told reporters on Thursday that he believes a majority of Congress supports renewing aid to Ukraine but admitted that a small minority of lawmakers that could block such assistance.
"I think the vast majority of members of Congress support aid to Ukraine," Biden said. "The question is whether or not a small minority are going to hold it up, which would be a disaster."
Biden hosted congressional leaders this week to discuss his supplemental request of more than $100 billion to address US national security concerns, including more than $60 billion for Ukraine.
Republican lawmakers have made clear they will only support Biden's supplemental request if it includes meaningful policy changes to stop the influx of migrants arriving at the US southern border.
US House Speaker Mike Johnson, after attending the meeting with Biden, told reporters that the US status quo on Ukraine is unacceptable.
Johnson further said Congress needs a clearer explanation from the Biden administration about

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its strategy in Ukraine, the endgame, and accountability for US funds. He added that US border security must be the top priority.

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Biden Warns Congress Lack of Ukraine Aid Could Lead to Troops on Ground - White House

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden met with congressional leaders and warned them that not approving additional funding for Ukraine could possibly result in the deployment of US troops to that country, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said on Thursday.

"The president conveyed a sense of urgency about the stakes for our NATO partners in the region, what it would mean for our NATO partners in the region, and certainly we don't want to see our own troops put in a position where we might need to put boots on the ground," Jean-Pierre said.

On Wednesday, US House Speaker Mike Johnson said that the United States' status quo on Ukraine is unacceptable.

Johnson also said Congress needs a clearer explanation from the Biden administration about its strategy in Ukraine, the endgame and accountability for US funds. The speaker also added that US border security must be the top priority.

Biden's supplemental request includes more than $60 billion for Ukraine.

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US Believes Russia May Be Open to New START Negotiations – Senior NSC Official

(Adds Lavrov's remarks in paras 3-4)

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) – The United States believes Russia may be willing to negotiate on the New START Treaty as it nears its 2026 expiry, according to a senior National Security Council official on Thursday.

"I firmly believe that Russia, based on the fact that they extended the New START Treaty at the very beginning of the Biden administration, sees — and continues to adhere to the central limit — sees some interest in limiting us, at least at the central strategic level, as we do in limiting them, and so, because of that basic fact, I think that they will want to come back to the table at some point and ideally before expiration, but Russia could also be unpredictable," Pranay Vaddi, special assistant to the president and National Security Council senior director for arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation, said at a CSIS event.

Moscow sees no possibility for a strategic dialogue with Washington at the moment, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Thursday during his annual press conference. The West must stop anti-Russian rhetoric to create a possibility for such talks.

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Russia does not reject the possibility of negotiations, as well as "the possibility of a political and diplomatic settlement" on the issue of strategic stability, but Washington wants to resume control over the Russian nuclear arsenal under the guise of reciprocity, Lavrov stated.

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US Does Not Want Escalation Between Iran, Pakistan, Monitoring Situation -White House

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The US does not want to see an escalation of conflict between Iran and Pakistan, and is closely monitoring the situation, Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Thursday.

"We're monitoring this very, very closely, we don't want to see an escalation...in South and Central Asia, and we're in touch with our Pakistani counterparts," Kirby said during a gaggle.

Furthermore, Kirby said that he was not aware of any pre-notification that the US received when asked about the attack.

The attack came two days after Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps launched ballistic missiles and drones at a base of terrorist group Jaish al-Adl in Pakistan's Balochistan in retaliation for terrorist attacks on its own territory last month.

This was the first missile strike by the Iranian armed forces on Pakistani territory. Pakistani authorities said that two children were killed and several people were injured by Tehran's attack and lodged a strong protest with the Iranian Foreign Ministry and Iran's envoy in Islamabad.

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Judge Orders Hearing on Fulton District Attorney-Trump Prosecutor Relationship - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - A judge in the US state of Georgia has ordered a hearing over the alleged "improper relationship" between the Fulton County District Attorney and the prosecutor handling the case of former President Donald Trump, the Washington Post reported on Thursday.

The Georgia judge overseeing the election interference case against Trump scheduled the hearing for February 15 on the evidence that Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis and her lead prosecutor were engaged in an improper relationship and mishandled public funds, the report said.

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Canada Poised to Receive Thousands of Ukrainians on Emergency Visas Before April - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - Canada expects a significant surge in Ukrainian immigrants arriving in the country via the temporary emergency visa program by the end of March, the Globe and Mail reported on Thursday.

The Canadian government established the program soon after Russia started its special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022, but it is set to expire at the end of March.

Canadian settlement agencies are getting ready for the anticipated influx after Operation Ukraine Safe Haven (OUSH) determined through surveys that as many as 90,000 emergency visa holders are considering arriving in Canada before the program expires, the report said.

The main challenge is finding the newcomers places to stay amid a decrease in public interest in the Russia-Ukraine conflict and a reduced number of families' offers to open their homes to them, the report said.

OUSH is encouraging newcomers to arrive before the deadline and to consider settling in smaller communities where housing could be more affordable and easier to find, the report said.

Since March 2022, the Canadian government has issued more than 930,000 temporary emergency visas for Ukrainians seeking work or study in Canada and some 210,000 have since been admitted into the country, the report said.

The multitude of reports about the expected surge comes a week after the media reported that a 2022 analysis by the Ministry of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship on the consequences immigration could have on the Canadian economy and housing, showed that the country's population growth was outpacing new housing.

Government officials have since been warned that rapid demographic growth would add heightened pressure on Canada's health care and housing affordability at a time when the population increase was already outpacing the supply of new housing.

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Biden Continues to Back Two-State Solution Regardless of Israeli Opposition - White House

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden continues to support a two-state solution regardless of opposition from Israeli leadership, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Thursday.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reportedly told the United States that he opposes the establishment of a Palestinian state as part of any post-war scenario in Gaza.

"In reaction to Netanyahu rejecting a Palestinian state in a post-war scenario for Gaza, I would just tell you that nothing has changed about President Biden's desire that a two-state solution is really in the best interest of not only the Israeli people, but of course, the Palestinian people," Kirby told reporters.

A two-state solution would also be in the best interest of the Middle East region, and Biden is not going to stop working towards that goal, Kirby added.

On October 7, 2023, Palestinian movement Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack

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against Israel from the Gaza Strip while its fighters breached the border, attacking both civilian neighborhoods and military bases. As a result, over 1,200 people in Israel were killed and some 240 others abducted.

Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza and launched a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. Over 24,200 people have been killed so far in Gaza as a result of Israeli strikes, according to local authorities.

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Guterres, Lavrov To Meet In New York Next Week - UN

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) –UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will meet Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in New York next week, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Thursday.

"Yes, he will be meeting," Dujarric told reporters.

When asked about the subjects for discussion, Dujarric pointed out that Guterres is ready to talk about everything Lavrov wishes to discuss. "I think we can easily imagine a number of agenda items," he added.

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Biden Says Trump's Win in Iowa Caucus Did Not Mean 'Anything'

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that his predecessor Donald Trump's win in the Iowa Republican caucus did not mean "anything," according to the White House press pool.

Biden also provided his view on the declining support among Arabs and Muslims in the United States stating that, unlike him, Trump allegedly wants to ban Muslims and that there is a "long way to go" before November when the presidential election 2024 is scheduled to take place.

During the Iowa caucuses on Monday, Trump received 51% of the votes in the state, followed by Florida Governor Ron DeSantis (21.2%), former US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley (19.1%) and US entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy (7.7%). Ramaswamy announced on Monday he was dropping out of the presidential race.

Commenting on the Iowa caucus results on Tuesday, Biden called Trump a "clear front-runner" from the Republicans.

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UPDATE - US Justice Dept. Says Identified 'Critical Failures' in Police Response to Uvalde Shooting

(Updates with more details in paras 9, 10)

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department said on Thursday that it had identified critical leadership failures in law enforcement's response to the May 2022 school shooting in Uvalde, Texas, in which the gunman killed 21 people.

On May 24, 2022, 18-year-old Salvador Ramos shot and killed 19 students and two teachers at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde. Police did not confront the shooter until 77 minutes after officers first arrived at the scene, the Justice Department said in a Critical Incident Review (CIR) of law enforcement's response to the incident.

"Based on these facts, the CIR team identified several critical failures and other breakdowns prior to, during, and after the Robb Elementary School response and analyzed the cascading failures of leadership, decision-making, tactics, policy, and training that contributed to those failures and breakdowns," the review said.

Law enforcement's most significant failure was not immediately pushing toward the shooter to eliminate the threat, the review said. Neutralizing an active shooter as a first priority of police responders has been the accepted practice since the 1999 Columbine High School shooting, the review said.

The safety of police officers is subordinate to eliminating the threat, the review said.

Moreover, first responders failed to establish incident command structure to coordinate the responders who arrived at the scene, the review said. The lack of structure contributed to confusion among responders about who was in charge and how they could help, the review also said.

Officials also suffered from communications challenges in the aftermath of the shooting, including spreading inaccurate and incomplete information in press engagements, the review added.

The review recommends that law enforcement agencies maintain clear and concise active shooter response policies, that public information officers prepare for communications during a mass casualty incident and that agencies address the mental health aspect of responding to mass casualty incidents.

President Joe Biden issued a statement on the review saying his team will work with the Justice Department and Education Department to implement necessary policy changes to help communities respond more effectively in the future.

The US Congress must also pass gun control measures, including a ban on so-called assault weapons and high-capacity magazines, to try and prevent mass shootings, the statement said.

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White House Says Nuclear Talks With Iran Not Going to Happen Anytime Soon

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The United States prefers diplomatic engagement to reign in Iran's nuclear ambitions, but at present it does not seem it will be possible anytime soon, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Thursday.
"We certainly prefer to achieve that outcome through diplomacy," Kirby told reporters. "Obviously, that's not going to happen anytime soon. So we will make sure that we have the capabilities and the options available to the Commander-in-Chief to prevent that outcome."

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US Conducts New Round of Strikes Against Houthis Thursday Morning - White House

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The United States has conducted another round of strikes against the Houthis this morning, White House Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby said on Thursday.
"We did it again this morning, striking at some anti-ship missiles, a couple of anti-ship missiles that we had reason to believe were being prepared for imminent fire into the Southern Red Sea," said Kirby during a press briefing.

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US Says Conflict in Ukraine Not an Obstacle in Talks With Russia on Strategic Stability

WASHINGTON, January 18(Sputnik) - The United States does not consider the ongoing conflict in Ukraine an obstacle to interact with Russia on strategic stability, National Security Council's Senior Director Pranay Vaddi said on Thursday .
"I think this would be true for my colleagues in the interagency outlets who viewed our engagement with Russia, specifically on nuclear arms control in a supportive way. I think they acknowledge that between the unpredictability of Russia's foreign policy, the actions they've taken in Ukraine, the nuclear saber rattling that accompany their invasion of Ukraine that having the United States and Russia engage each other on a nuclear risk and nuclear arms control is valuable," Vaddi said when asked about the perspectives of a dialogue between Moscow and Washington during the special military operation.
Regarding those allies who have some concerns over diplomatic engagement with Russia, Vaddi said, that the US hasn't negotiated anything with the Russians.
Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Thursday, that Moscow currently sees no possibility for a strategic dialogue with Washington at the moment, adding that the West must stop using anti-Russian rhetoric for the possibility to hold such talks.
Moscow does not reject the possibility of negotiations, as well as "the possibility of a political

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and diplomatic settlement" on the issue of strategic stability, but Washington wants to resume control over Russian nuclear arsenal under the guise of reciprocity, Lavrov said.

In addition, Lavrov said that last year Russia conveyed these thoughts in writing and warned Washington about there being no alternatives for Russia on these assessments.

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Google CEO Pichai Signals More Layoffs in 2024 Amid AI Push - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - Google CEO Sundar Pichai said in a memorandum to employees that workforce reductions should be anticipated in 2024 following a push on the use of artificial intelligence (AI), CBS News reported on Thursday.

Google cut 12,000 jobs in 2023 across various departments, including in the hardware, core engineering, policy and advertisement sales divisions, the report said.

This year, the company has decided to further downsize its workforce, with hundreds of layoffs in the hardware, voice assistance and engineering divisions, the report said.

Pichai communicated company management's intentions to "remove layers" from the workforce throughout the year, reallocating resources to address significant priorities, the report added.

However, Pichai did not provide details on the specific positions that will be affected, but emphasized that the upcoming layoffs would be less extensive than the job cuts witnessed last year, according to the report.

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Biden Says US Airstrikes on Yemen Will Continue But Admits They Are Not Working

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Thursday that the US will continue to launch airstrikes on Yemen though he acknowledged that the bombings were not effective in deterring Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping vessels, according to White House pool reporters.

“Well, when you say 'working' are they stopping the Houthis? No. Are they going to continue? Yes,” Biden said.

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US Finds Focusing on Iran Nuclear Activities Amid Gaza Crisis ‘Very Challenging’ - NSC

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WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The United States finds it "very challenging" to focus on Iran's nuclear activities amid the crisis in the Gaza Strip, National Security Council (NSC) Senior Director for Arms Control, Disarmament and Nonproliferation Pranay Vaddi said on Thursday.

"In the current context of the Gaza crisis, obviously, it's very challenging for us to just focus on Iran's activities as it relates to its nuclear program," Vaddi said.

Vaddi emphasized that the United States supports the work by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) with respect to Iran.

"We have been pushing to make sure that Iran follows through on some of the commitments they have already made to the IAEA," Vaddi said.

The NSC senior director also said the United States has ways to pass messages or concerns on its own as well.

In addition, Vaddi said that it is a very challenging time to engage at the level of diplomacy as it was early in the Biden administration as it related to the Iran nuclear agreement, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

"Our hope is that, you know, as the crisis is wrapped up in the coming months or years, that we are able to engage in a conversation that's more fruitful and fulsome as it relates to Iran's nuclear program," Vaddi added.

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US Fuel Inventories Bloat on Week, Crude Stockpiles Shrink

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - US fuel inventories bloated last week while stockpiles of crude fell, according to data on Thursday that provided what analysts called a mixed outlook to an oil market volatile since the start of the year.

US crude oil inventories fell by 2.492 million barrels during the week ended January 12, after a 1.338-million-barrel build during the prior week to January 5, data from the Energy Information Administration (EIA) showed.

But inventories of gasoline, the largest consumed fuel in the United States, jumped by 3.083 million barrels, adding to the prior week's rise of 8.029 million.

Stockpiles of distillates — primarily processed into the diesel required by trucks, buses and ships, and also as airline fuel — gained 2.370 million barrels after a 6.528 million barrel gain the prior week.

Crude prices have been volatile since 2024 began as market participants try to gauge supply-demand in a market some fear may see higher barrel availability than a year ago due to less supply issues.

US crude's West Texas Intermediate benchmark was trending 1.1% higher this week, at around $73.50 a barrel. Last week, it was down 1.5%.

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US Justice Dept. Says Identified 'Critical Failures' in Police Response to Uvalde Shooting

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department said on Thursday that it identified critical leadership failures in law enforcement's response to a May 2022 school shooting in Uvalde, Texas, in which the gunman killed 21 people.

On May 24, 2022, 18-year-old Salvador Ramos shot and killed 19 students and two teachers at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde. Police did not confront the shooter until 77 minutes after officers first arrived at the scene, the US Justice Department said in a Critical Incident Review (CIR) of law enforcement's response to the incident.

"Based on these facts, the CIR team identified several critical failures and other breakdowns prior to, during, and after the Robb Elementary School response and analyzed the cascading failures of leadership, decision-making, tactics, policy, and training that contributed to those failures and breakdowns," the review said.

Law enforcement's most significant failure was not immediately pushing toward the shooter to eliminate the threat, the review said. Neutralizing an active shooter as a first priority of police responders has been the accepted practice since the 1999 Columbine High School shooting, the review said.

The safety of police officers is subordinate to eliminating the threat, the review added.

Moreover, first responders failed to establish incident command structure to coordinate the responders who arrived at the scene, the review said. The lack of structure contributed to confusion among responders about who was in charge and how they could help, the review said.

Officials also suffered from communications challenges in the aftermath of the shooting, including spreading inaccurate and incomplete information in press engagements, the review said.

The review recommends that law enforcement agencies maintain clear and concise active shooter response policies, that public information officers prepare for communications during a mass casualty incident and that agencies address the mental health aspect of responding to mass casualty incidents.

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US House Holds Final Hearing into Impeaching Homeland Security Secretary

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) – The US House Homeland Security Committee held its second and final hearing on Thursday on potentially impeaching Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas.

"This hearing is about the human costs of Secretary Mayorkas' egregious misconduct and failure to fulfill his oath of office," Chairman Mark Green said in opening remarks.

Ranking Member Bennie Thompson disputed Green's contention that Mayorkas was refusing to

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testify before the committee, saying that he had testified before Congress more than any other cabinet secretary and agreed in a letter to testify at a mutually convenient date.

Thompson also argued that the threat of impeachment was a partisan, predetermined move, saying that "you cannot impeach a cabinet secretary because you don't like a president's policies. That's not put impeachment is for."

The committee reportedly plans to vote on January 31 on an impeachment resolution.

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US Senator Lee Says Hopes House Republicans Will Add Border Security Measures to CR

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - US Senator Mike Lee said on Thursday that he hopes Republican members of the House of Representatives will push to include more stringent border security measures in a continuing resolution (CR) to extend temporary government funding.

The US Congress must pass government funding legislation before January 19 or else the government will begin shutting down. Lawmakers face another funding deadline on February 2, having split up deadlines for different parts of the government in a so-called "laddered" CR in November.

"Biden can't fund the government. Only Congress can," Lee said in a statement via social media platform X. "Republicans, who control the House, want border security. They could add a border-security bill to this week's CR. I hope they will."

The US Senate is set to vote on passage of a CR later on Thursday, which would extend the temporary government funding deadlines to March 1 and 8, in an effort to give lawmakers more time to pass appropriations bills. The US House of Representatives is set to take up the measure on Thursday as well.

Earlier this month, a group of Republican members of Congress including Lee and US Congressman Matt Rosendale vowed to try and withhold funding from the Biden administration until the United States' borders are secure from a surge in illegal migration.

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More Than 2% of People in Kentucky on Rising Weight Loss, Diabetes Medications - Report

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - Approximately 2% of people in the US state of Kentucky were prescribed glucagon-like peptide-1 (GLP-1) agonists, an increasingly common class of weight loss and diabetes medications, according to data from health analytics firm PurpleLab reported by Axios on Thursday.

Just under 21 out of every 1,000 people in Kentucky were prescribed a GLP-1 agonist, including semaglutide and tirzepatide, the report said, citing PurpleLab's insurance claim data. Kentucky had the highest GLP-1 agonist prescription rate in the United States, the report said.

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Semaglutide is sold under the Ozempic, Rybelsus and Wegovy brand names, and tirzepatide is sold as Mounjaro and Zepbound. Both medications, which are used to treat type 2 diabetes and obesity, have been increasingly prescribed in the US in recent years.

West Virginia had the second highest GLP-1 agonist prescription rate of any US state, at 18.9 prescriptions per 1,000 people, followed by Alaska, Mississippi and Louisiana, the report said. Rhode Island had the lowest rate at 3.7 prescriptions per 1,000 people, and neighboring state Massachusetts had the second lowest at four per 1,000 people, the report said.

The statistics are based on 1.9 billion private insurance, Medicare and Medicaid claims, the report said. Prescriptions for diabetes and weight loss were not separated in the data, nor does the data include how long people took the prescriptions, the report said.

The data also does not include prescriptions that were paid for with cash; a one-month supply of the medications costs approximately $900-$1,300, the report said.

Approximately 11% of the US population has diabetes, 90-95% of which are type 2, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. More than 40% of people in the US are obese, the CDC also said.

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UPDATE - US Issues New Russia-Related Sanctions Against 1 Entity, 17 Vessels - Treasury Dept.

(Updates with more details throughout text; provides background in para 8; modifies lede)

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed new Russia-related sanctions on one United Arab Emirates (UAE)-based entity and more than a dozen vessels for allegedly violating the Group of Seven-imposed oil price cap, the US Department of the Treasury said in a press release on Thursday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is taking its first oil price cap enforcement action of 2024, targeting a shipping company linked to a price cap violation," the release said.

The new sanctions were imposed on Hennesea Holdings Limited from Abu Dhabi and its 17 crude oil tankers who sail under the glag of Liberia, the release said.

OFAC has also re-identified one more crude oil tanker belonging to Hennesea Holdings Limited, the HS Atlantica, making it a total of 18 blocked vessels operated by the UAE-based company, the release said.

In parallel with imposing the new set of sanctions, OFAC issued a general license authorizing certain transactions that involve the sanctioned vessels.

The transactions concern the vessels' safe docking and anchoring in port; preserving the health or safety of the crews; and undertaking emergency repairs or environmental mitigation, according to the text of the license.

The license is effective through April 17.

In December 2022, the Group of Seven countries, Australia and the European Union imposed a price cap of $60 per barrel on Russian crude oil transported by sea. They vowed to impose

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sanctions on those companies and vessels that transport crude oil sold at a higher price. Russia responded by prohibiting selling its oil to countries supporting the price cap.

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US Believes Russia May Be Open to New START Negotiations – Senior NSC Official

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) – The US believes Russia may be willing to negotiate on the New START Treaty as it nears its 2026 expiry, according to a senior National Security Council official on Thursday.

"I firmly believe that Russia, based on the fact that they extended the New START Treaty at the very beginning of the Biden administration, sees — and continues to adhere to the central limit — sees some interest in limiting us, at least at the central strategic level, as we do in limiting them, and so, because of that basic fact, I think that they will want to come back to the table at some point and ideally before expiration, but Russia could also be unpredictable," said Pranay Vaddi, special assistant to the president and National Security Council senior director for arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation.

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US Approves Certain Transactions With Russian Central Bank, National Wealth Fund- Treasury

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury Department on Thursday issued a general license authorizing certain transactions of US entities with the Russian Central Bank, the National Wealth Fund and the Ministry of Finance through April 17.

"US persons, or entities … are authorized to pay taxes, fees, or import duties and purchase or receive permits, licenses, registrations, certifications, or tax refunds" to the extent they are related to transactions involving the Russian Central Bank, the National Wealth Fund and the Ministry of Finance, the text of the license said.

The license is effective through 12:01 a.m. EDT on April 17, the text of the license said.

The Treasury Department pointed out that the license does not authorize any debit to an account on the books of a US financial institution of the Russian Central Bank, National Wealth Fund or the Ministry of Finance.

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US, Nigeria in Talks on Security, Human Rights, Religious Freedom – State Dept.

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WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) – US officials are engaging in discussions with a Nigerian delegation this week on security, human rights and other topics of mutual concern, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Molly Phee said on Thursday.

"We are hosting this week a Nigerian delegation led by the national security adviser, and we hosted about 4 hours of discussion at the State Department yesterday," Phee told reporters.

Phee said the talks focused on a variety of topics, including security, promoting and protecting human rights, and religious freedom.

"[These issues] are parts of our ongoing dialogue with the [Nigerian] government and with their security services," she added.

Phee expressed confidence that US Secretary of State Antony Blinken would discuss these topics with top Nigerian officials during his upcoming trip to the country.

The State Department said earlier on Thursday that Blinken would travel to Cabo Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, Nigeria and Angola from January 21-26.

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US Says African States Can Diversify Partnership, Warns Against Cooperation With Russia

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) – African states can diversify their partnership with other countries, but cooperation with Russia would be complicated, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Molly Phee said on Thursday.

"We do not have any objections with countries diversifying partnerships. Obviously, if they chose to have a partnership with countries like Russia, that would be very complicated," Phee told reporters.

She urged to take into account the example of Mali, adding that the government's decision to invite the Wagner group led to the increase in civilian casualties and terrorist attacks.

The Wagner Group began operating in Mali in 2021 after the Malian authorities hired the group to train soldiers and protect high-profile officials following a military coup d'etat in 2020.

In 2023, the United States designated the Wagner Group as a significant transnational criminal organization.

Russia repeatedly refuted accusations of participating in purchasing and transferring any weapons through the territory of Mali.

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US to Entertain Any Formal Russian Proposal on Space Capabilities' Concerns - NSC Official

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The United States would entertain any formal proposals by Russia to discuss its concerns that include space capabilities and missile defense, National Security Council (NSC) Senior Director Pranay Vaddi said on Thursday.

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"We have heard in the past concerns expressed by Russia on conventional capabilities, on dual capable long-range strike, things like that. In other venues, they've expressed concerns with space capabilities, missile defense, you name it. None of these have come back to us in the terms of the formal proposal," Vaddi said.

The NSC senior director pointed out that the shape of a future arrangement or set of arrangements remains yet to be determined.

"I think Deputy Foreign Minister Ryabkov at some point over the course of last year in an interview mentioned there might be informal measures that are worth considering if it's too difficult to pursue a more formal negotiation," he said. "I don't know what more there is to that statement beyond what he said but we of course would entertain any proposals to have a discussion."

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US Investing in 5 West Africa Projects to Support Economic Development - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The United States is investing in joint projects with five West African states in an attempt to support economic development and boost security, US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Molly Phee said on Thursday.

"We have already invested in joint projects in five coastal states in West Africa. Those include the Ivory Coast, Ghana, Guinea-Conakry, Benin and Togo," Phee said.

The coastal countries in West Africa, along with Nigeria, are facing significant terrorist threats and those magnify the importance of cooperation on economic issues, Phee said.

"If you neglect governance, economic development, factors like climate change, you cannot really get a durable solution," Phee said.

Terrorist threats in the Sahel region would be a part of the discussions that US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken will engage in during his upcoming trip to the region later in January, Phee added.

Earlier on Thursday, the State Department said Blinken will travel to Cape Verde, Nigeria, Angola and the Ivory Coast from January 21-26.

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US Trying to Respond to New Security Status Quo Created By Russia - Official

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The United States is trying to respond to the new strategic security status quo created by Russia, National Security Council Senior Director Pranay Vaddi said on Thursday.

"In our approach towards Russia, we are trying to hold Russia to account where obviously we have taken legal countermeasures as it relates to suspension of New START," Vaddi said at a

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CSIS event. "We are trying to inform the international community as to what Russia is actually doing in the context of these agreements … We are also trying to respond to the new security status quo that has been created by Russia's actions and their aggression."

Moscow sees no possibility for a strategic dialogue with Washington at the moment, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Thursday. The West must stop anti-Russian rhetoric to create a possibility for such talks.

Russia does not reject the possibility of negotiations, as well as "the possibility of a political and diplomatic settlement" on the issue of strategic stability, but Washington wants to resume control over Russian nuclear arsenal under the guise of reciprocity, Lavrov stated.

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US Awaiting China Response to Nuclear Risk Reduction Ideas – NSC

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) – The United States is seeking for China to respond to its ideas on nuclear risk reduction, according to a senior National Security Council official on Thursday.

"On the arms control front, we really want to see China respond to some of our more substantive ideas on risk reduction, and we're still waiting to see if they will," Pranay Vaddi, special assistant to the president and National Security Council senior director for arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation, said at a CSIS event.

Vaddi noted that it was "really good obviously to see the mil-to-mil communications resumed as well, because our emphasis for so long has been really on strategic risk reduction."

However, beyond maintaining open lines of communication, "as it relates to arms control, we want to see some practical measures start to get discussed in these venues," he said.

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White House Considers Effort to Impeach Mayorkas 'Extreme, Far-Right Politics'

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) – The Biden administration sees ongoing efforts to impeach Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas as "extreme, far-right politics," White House spokesman for oversight and investigations Ian Sams said on Thursday.

"Beyond the shameless partisanship of attempting to scapegoat a Cabinet secretary who is actively working to find solutions to a problem Congressional Republicans have spent years refusing to actually solve, this stunt by House Republicans is just the latest example of their blatant disregard for the Constitution and our democratic system of government," Sams said in a memo.

Sams said Republicans are playing "extreme, far-right politics" and compared the ongoing impeachment process against Mayorkas to efforts to overturn the 2020 president election and

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impeach President Joe Biden.

He further said, citing legal experts and constitutional scholars, that the impeachment effort against Mayorkas is indefensible, has no historical precedent and is devoid of evidence.

On Thursday, the House Committee on Homeland Security is holding its second and final Mayorkas impeachment hearing. The panel accuses him of mishandling the immigration crisis at the southern border.

The impeachment probe comes amid a record surge in illegal immigration on the US southern border. According to media reports, US officials documented 302,000 migrant encounters on the US southern border in December, the highest figure recorded in a single month.

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Imperative to Lift Restrictions to Access in North Gaza - UNICEF Deputy Director

UNITED NATIONS, January 18 (Sputnik) - No UNICEF humanitarian convoy has reached the northern part of the Gaza Strip in 2024 and it is imperative that the Israel-imposed restrictions to access are lifted given that Gaza faces a "near collapse," UNICEF Deputy Executive Director Ted Chaiban said on Thursday after visiting the Palestinian enclave.

"Once aid gets into the Gaza Strip, our ability to distribute it becomes a matter of life and death," Chaiban said. "It is imperative that access restrictions are lifted, reliable ground communications ensured and movement of humanitarian supplies facilitated to ensure those who have been without aid for days receive desperately needed assistance."

Chaiban called for ensuring that commercial traffic gets flowing in Gaza in order to reopen markets and make families be less dependent on aid relief.

"There must also be fewer restrictions on the kind of aid we can bring in, such as generators for water pumps and pipes to repair water facilities, which are critical to restore the water and sanitation services essential for people's survival," Chaiban said.

Up to 300,000 people living in north Gaza have no access to clean water and barely any food and only seven out of 29 planned aid deliveries have successfully reached their destinations in northern Gaza in January, Chaiban said.

"Not a single UNICEF convoy has accessed the north of the Gaza Strip in 2024," he said.

Chaiban pointed out that since his last visit, the humanitarian situation in Gaza has gone from "catastrophic to near collapse."

"If this decline persists, we could see deaths due to indiscriminate conflict compounded by deaths due to disease and hunger," he said. "We need a major breakthrough. This starts with an end to the intense bombardment, which is not only killing thousands, but is also impeding the delivery of aid to survivors."

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US Issues New Russia-Related Sanctions Against 1 Entity, 17 Vessels - Treasury Dept.

(Updates with more details in paras 3-5; modifies para 2)
WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed new Russia-related sanctions on one United Arab Emirates-based entity and more than a dozen vessels, the US Treasury Department said on Thursday.
The new sanctions were imposed on Hennesea Holdings Limited from Abu Dhabi and its 17 crude oil tankers under the Liberian flag, the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) said in a press release.
In parallel with imposing the new set of sanctions, OFAC issued a general license authorizing certain transactions that involve the sanctioned Hennesea Holdings' vessels.
The transactions concern the vessels' safe docking and anchoring in port; preserving the health or safety of the crews; and undertaking emergency repairs or environmental mitigation, according to the text of the license.
The license is effective through April 17.

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US Has Not Received Substantive Feedback From Russia on Arms Control Proposal - Official

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The United States has not received meaningful feedback from Russia with regard to its proposal on arms control, the National Security Council's senior director for arms control, disarmament, and nonproliferation said on Thursday.
"The meat of the proposal we sent to Russia in September was designed to reinitiate that conversation. What we've seen today and in their formal response a few weeks ago is that Russia is unwilling to engage," Pranay Vaddi said at a CSIS event. "We didn't get any sort of substantive feedback on the things we wanted to talk about, the things that I mentioned such as returning to New Start compliance, post-New Start framework and managing nuclear risks, three relatively specific ideas I think we put out there to talk about. Russia is not responding in detail to any of those three things."

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US Has Avenues to Engage With Russia, Hopes Moscow Open - Arms Control Official

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The United States has several avenues to engage with Russia in multilateral formats and hopes that Moscow is willing to engage, the National Security Council's senior director for arms control, disarmament, and nonproliferation said on Thursday.
"We've left an open door to arms control engagement, we continue to offer bilateral engagement on nuclear arms control and managing strategic risks," Pranay Vaddi, said at a

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CSIS event. "There are other avenues for engagement with Russia in multilateral venues, we are going to show up to those venues, we will continue to press our priorities … and we hope that Russia is willing to engage there."

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US Issues New Russia-Related Sanctions Against 1 Entity, Several Vessels - Treasury Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) – The United States announced a new package of Russia-related sanctions on one United Arab Emirates-based entity and more than a dozen vessels, the US Department of the Treasury said on Thursday.

The new sanctions were imposed on Hennesea Holdings Limited from Abu Dhabi and 17 crude oil tankers under the Liberian flag, the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control said in a press release.

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Nova Scotia Govt. Charges Man for Largest Wildfire in Province History

WASHINGTON, January 18 (Sputnik) - The Canadian province of Nova Scotia has charged a Villagedale man for being the culprit behind the greatest ever recorded wildfire in the province's history, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Renewables said on Thursday.

"Charges were laid Wednesday, January 17, under the Forests Act following an investigation into the Barrington Lake wildfire in Shelburne County last spring," the Ministry of Natural Resources and Renewables said in a statement.

Dalton Clark Stewart, a 22-year-old resident of Villagedale, was charged with lighting a fire on privately owned land without permission of the owner or occupier; failing to take reasonable efforts to prevent the fire from spreading; and leaving the fire unattended, the statement said.

Stewart is set to appear before the Shelburne provincial court on March 7, the statement said.

Under the Forest Act, an individual could be fined up to C$50,000 (US$37,000) and/or be sentenced up to six months in prison, the statement added.

The fire at Barrington Lake burned from May 26 through July 26 and destroyed 23,379 hectares of forest land in the southwestern part of Nova Scotia. The fire burnt 60 houses and cottages as well as nearly 150 other structures.

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